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Allegiances

LICHENCLAN

LEADER **Birdstar** - Elderly brown tabby she-cat with amber eyes

DEPUTY **Jumpheart-** Golden brown tabby tom with green eyes

MEDICINE CAT **Sagefeather-** Fluffy gray she-cat with green eyes

Apprentice, Stormpaw

WARRIORS (*toms and she-cats without kits)*

Feathercloud - Soft gray and white she-cat with blue eyes
Apprentice, Sparrowpaw

Patchfoot- White and brown tom with amber eyes
Apprentice, Badgerpaw

Hareclaw- Brown tom with green eyes

Sunstorm- Golden tom with amber eyes
Apprentice, Daisypaw

Rowanfang- Dark brown tom with amber eyes
Apprentice, Fieldpaw

Krestleflame- Golden brown tabby she-cat with amber eyes

Cedercloud- Brown tabby she-cat with green eyes

Poppywing- Black and brown she-cat with green eyes
Apprentice, Hazelpaw

Ashstream- Dark gray she-cat with blue eyes
Apprentice, Gingerpaw

Amberflame- Ginger she-cat with amber eyes
Apprentice, Vinepaw

Breezefall- Pale brown tom with amber eyes

Mothflame- Dappled gray she-cat with blue eyes

Skytail- Gray tabby tom with green eyes

APPRENTICES *(older than six moons, training to become warriors)*

Stormpaw- Gray she-cat with blue eyes (Daughter of Feathercloud and Skytail)

Daisypaw- Pale gray she-cat with blue eyes (Daughter of Feathercloud and Skytail)

Badgerpaw- Black and white tom with amber eyes (Son of Feathercloud and Skytail)

Vinepaw- Brown she-cat with green eyes (Daughter of Cedercloud and Patchfoot)

Sparrowpaw- Brown and black tabby tom with amber eyes (Son of Cedercloud and Patchfoot)

Hazelpaw- Brown she-cat with amber eyes (Daughter of Cedercloud and Patchfoot)

Fieldpaw- Light golden-brown tom (Son of Krestleflame and Hareclaw)

Gingerpaw- Ginger she-cat with green eyes (Daughter of Krestleflame and Hareclaw)

QUEENS *(she-cats expecting or nursing kits)*

Fawnsky- Brown-she cat with green eyes, nursing Sunstorm's kits. (Jaggedkit, brown tom with amber eyes and a crooked tail, and Maplekit, golden brown she-cat with green eyes)

Mosswing- Brown she-cat with green eyes, nursing Rowanfang's

kits. (Elmkit, brown tom with amber eyes and Robinkit, dark brown she-cat)

ELDERS *(former warriors and queens, now retired)*

Tigercloud- Brown tabby she-cat with amber eyes

Dustfang- Pale brown tom with green eyes

Rockflower- Gray she-cat with blue eyes

SUNCLAN

LEADER **Foxstar** -Ginger tom with white paws

DEPUTY **Mallownose**- Pale gray she-cat

MEDICINE CAT **Feathernose** - Soft silver tabby tom
Apprentice, Honeypaw

WARRIORS

Hawktalon- Brown tabby tom with amber eyes

Falconclaw- Dark brown tabby tom with amber eyes

Owlfoot- Pale brown tom with darker paws
Apprentice, Flowerpaw

Marshpelt- Dark brown she-cat with green eyes
Apprentice, Sunpaw

Leafwhisker- brown she-cat with green eyes
Apprentice, Sandpaw

Stonewhisker- Gray tom with amber eyes
Apprentice, Applepaw

Moonfur- Cream colored she-cat with blue eyes

Brightclaw- Golden tom with green eyes
Apprentice, Cloudpaw

Rockfall- Gray tom with amber eyes

APPRENTICES

Honeypaw- Golden she-cat with green eyes (Leafwhisker and Brightclaw's daughter)

Flowerpaw- Pale gray she-cat with pale green eyes (Stonewhisker and Dovewish's daughter

Sunpaw- Golden she-cat with green eyes (Leafwhisker and Brightclaw's daughter)

Stormpaw- Gray she-cat with lighter paws and blue eyes (Stormwhisker and Dovewish's daughter)

Sandpaw- Tortoiseshell she-cat with amber eyes and light ginger paws (Owlfoot and Firetail's daughter)

Applepaw- Tortoiseshell she-cat with green eyes (Owlfoot and Firetail's daughter)

Cloudpaw-White she-cat with blue eyes (Mallownose's and Rockfall's daughter)

QUEENS

Firetail- Ginger she-cat with green eyes, nursing Owlfoot's kits (Sandkit, calico she-cat with light ginger paws and Applekit, calico she-cat with green eyes)

Dovewish- gray she-cat with blue eyes, expecting Stormwhisker's kits

Nightwing- black she-cat with blue eyes, expecting Hawktalon's kits

ELDERS

Fishtail- Elderly silver tabby she-cat with blue eyes

ASHCLAN

LEADER **Goldenstar-** Golden brown she-cat with green eyes

DEPUTY **Ivyheart-** Gray tabby she-cat with green eyes

MEDICINE CAT **Featherstorm-** Gray she-cat with amber eyes
Apprentice, Eaglclaw

WARRIORS

Robinflight- Ginger tabby she-cat with amber eyes

Graywillow- Long furred, gray she-cat with green eyes

Berryleaf- Tortishell she-cat with green eyes

Dustclaw- Pale brown tabby tom with amber eyes

Ripplestep- Black tom with yellow eyes

Cinderflower- Dark gray she-cat with amber eyes

Jayflight- Dark gray tabby tom with green eyes

Skywing- Gray tabby tom with green eyes

Tawnyfrost- Dappled brown she-cat with green eyes

Owlstorm- Brown tabby tom with amber eyes

Scorchlight- Ginger tom with green eyes

Ravenfur- Black she-cat with yellow eyes

Silverstripe- Silver tabby tom with yellow eyes

Duskwhisker- Cream colored she-cat with blue eyes

Gorsestrike- Dark gray tom with amber eyes

Sharptongue- Brown tabby tom with yellow eyes

APPRENTICES

Eagleclaw - Dark brown tabby with amber eyes

Lionpaw- Dark golden tom with green eyes (Son of Goldenstar and Scorchlight)

Hazelpaw- Ginger she-cat with amber eyes. (Daughter of Goldenstar and Scorchlight)

Mudpaw- Dark brown tabby tom with amber eyes (Son of Tawnyfrost and Owlstorm)

Cloverpaw- Brown tabby she-cat with green eyes (Daughter of Tawnyfrost and Owlstorm)

Rainpaw- Gray tabby she-cat with white paws and blue eyes (Daughter of Graywillow and Silverstripe)

Hollypaw- Black and white she-cat with green eyes (Daughter of Berryleaf and Ripplestep)

Mousepaw- Brown tom with green eyes (Son of Berryleaf and Ripplestep)

Spiderpaw- Black and brown she-cat with yellow eyes (Daughter of Berryleaf and Ripplestep)

QUEENS

Mistypool- Silver she-cat with white chest and paws and blue eyes, expecting Jayflight's kits

ELDERS

Cinderclaw- Gray tabby she-cat with amber eyes

Sandnose- Pale ginger she-cat with green eyes

MOONCLAN

LEADER **Owlstar-** Fluffy white tom with blue eyes.

DEPUTY **Cloudwind-** Gray and white she-cat with blue eyes

MEDICINE CAT **Skyclaw-** Gray tom with yellow eyes

WARRIORS

Ashbird- Gray she-cat with black specks and blue eyes

Whiteriver- White she-cat with blue eyes

Blacksky- Black tom with white paws, belly and yellow eyes
Apprentice, Cinderpaw

Ivystone- Gray tabby she-cat with green eyes

Stonefoot- Large, gray tom with amber eyes

Thorntalon- Brown tabby tom with amber eyes
Apprentice, Breezepaw

Snakepelt- Gray tom with yellow eyes
Apprentice, Shadowpaw

Smokeleaf- Gray tabby she-cat with blue eyes

Sootmask- Black tom with white markings and amber eyes

Windsong- Light gray she-cat with blue eyes
Apprentice, Cedarpaw

Silverpool- Silver tabby she-cat with green eyes

Driftwater- Brown tom with amber eyes

Squirrelpelt- Ginger she-cat with green eyes

Spidertail- Black tom with amber eyes
Apprentice, Amberpaw

APPRENTICES

Amberpaw- Golden brown and white she-cat with green eyes
(Daughter of Squirrelpelt and Thorntalon)

Cedarpaw- Brown tom with amber eyes (Son of Squirrelpelt and

Thorntalon)

Shadowpaw- Dark gray tom with amber eyes (Son of Ashbird and Spidertail)

Breezepaw- Black she-cat with blue eyes (Daughter of Ashbird and Spidertail)

Cinderpaw- Gray she-cat with amber eyes (Daughter of Ashbird and Spidertail)

QUEENS

Riverlight- Black she-cat with blue eyes, nursing Blacksky's kit (Crowkit, black tom with white markings and blue eyes)

Blossomfrost- Light gray she-cat with blue eyes, expecting Owlstar's kits

ELDERS *(former warriors and queens, now retired)*

Runningpath- Lean, brown tom with amber eyes

Berryfrost- White she-cat with blue eyes

Haretooth- Brown tom with amber eyes

Ravenfall- Black she-cat with green eyes

[image]

Prologue

"You should be so happy." A brown she-cat mewed, her green eyes sparkling with joy and love as she gazed town at the two, small bundles of fur nestled down at Mosswing's belly. She looked down at her kits with joy, feeling an overwhelming feeling of love towards her brand new ildren. She nuzzled the two of them, the little brown tom let out a cry of alarm. The feeling in Mosswing's heart was almost too much, the love was so fierce.

"Thank you, Fawnsky." Mosswing replied to the brown she-cat, who had an incredibly swollen belly, also full of kits that would be born any day now. "I couldn't have done this without you."

Fawnsky purred, her tail twitching calmly. "We've been together through everything, haven't we?" Mosswing looked at her best friend with a feeling of love washing over her, the two had been together since they were kits, now she couldn't help but feel a wave of joy knowing that their kits would grow up together as well. "Just make sure you're there for me when it's my time" Fawnsky added, looking down at her swollen belly. "These little furballs should be here any day now."

Mosswing looked at her kits once more, they didn't have names yet. She wanted to make sure that they were perfect names. Mosswing looked back up, outside the nursery and into LichenClan camp which was covered in snow. Leaf-bare was in full flurry, and LichenClan was struggling. Mosswing couldn't help but look at her new kits as a good sign for the future, however.

Mosswing heard the shuffling of paws, she looked at the entrance in joy as she expected to see the dark brown pelt of her mate, Rowanfang. However, it was the golden pelt of Fawnsky's mate, Sunstorm. His amber eyes were filled with love as he approached his mate.

After touching noses with Fawnsky he turned to look at Mosswing. "How are the new kits, Mosswing?" He questioned kindly, looking at

the two young kits.

"They're wonderful." Mosswing purred in replied, she looked down at them, then back up at Sunstorm. "You wouldn't happen to know where Rowanfang is, would you?" She asked, trying to hide the uncertainty in her voice.

"I think he was out hunting," Sunstorm replied, sitting beside Fawnsky and washing her fur.

"He knows the kits are here, right?" Mosswing replied, shifting uncomfortably in her nest. Her two kits let out cries of protest.

"I'm sure he's just catching the perfect piece of prey for you," Sunstorm replied, his amber eyes light and kind. "Leaf-bare is a hard time to raise kits." Mosswing nodded and hoped that Sunstorm was right, Rowanfang had been so happy to be a father, she hoped he wasn't backing off now.

Mosswing rested her head on her paws, moving her kits even closer. She watched the outside of the nursery, listening to the sweet conversations between Fawnsky and Sunstorm, waiting hopefully for the love of her life to show up through the nursery entrance

Mosswing had fallen asleep during her wait for Rowanfang, and when she woke up Sunstorm was gone as well. Fawnsky was sleeping peacefully in her nest, and Mosswing let out a small sigh. She stood up, looking down at the two kits who slept silently in their nest as well, she grabbed extra moss to cover them up and keep them warm, then stepped outside of the nursery.

The sun was slowly rising in LichenClan camp, and Mosswing spotted Rowanfang speaking with the LichenClan deputy Jumpheart. Mosswing narrowed her eyes and stepped into the cold snow, it sent shivers up her legs but she pressed forward. She still felt a twinge of pain from giving birth the day before, but she needed to speak with Rowanfang. As she grew closer, Rowanfang noticed her approaching and looked at her with alarm.

"Mosswing," He said, amber eyes looking troubled. "Shouldn't you be resting?" Mosswing dug her claws into the snow.

"Shouldn't you be visiting your kits?" Mosswing replied, not wanting to sound too hostile but also wanting to get her point across. Rowanfang's ears flattened slightly, and he avoided Mosswing's gaze. Jumpheart slowly padded away without hesitation. "Well? Where have you been?" Mosswing demanded. "I'm sure you could spare a moment away from hunting to see your own kits."

Rowanfang sighed, he met Mosswing's gaze once more. "Mosswing, I'm sorry but...you couldn't have picked a worse time to have kits."

Mosswing was taken aback, she felt a sense of betrayal climbing through her heart. "Excuse me?" She took a step forward, baring her teeth. "I didn't *choose* when to have these kits, and you know they would be born in leaf-bare when we learned I was expecting them."

Rowanfang looked away. "Listen, Mosswing. We don't even have enough prey to feed the cats we already have in the Clan, let alone your kits *and* Fawnsky's kits."

Anger snapped inside Mosswing like a fire. "They're *our* kits!" Rowanfang winced and took a step back. "Or did you forget that?" She snarled. "If you're such a coward that you won't even see your kits for a chance that they might not survive, then you don't have to see them!" Mosswing spun around, so many emotions coursing through her body. "I know that the entirety of LichenClan will do what they can to keep these two kits alive, but if that's too much of a burden for you to handle, then feel free to not be involved with them."

Mosswing ran towards the nursery, she could feel her heart breaking into shatters. When she got into the den she looked towards her kits, sleeping quietly in their bundle of moss.

"Is everything okay, Mosswing?" Fawnsky asked, lifted her head. Sleep still heavy on her face. Mosswing glanced over her shoulder, Rowanfang hadn't followed her. With a sigh she returned to her nest, pulling her little kits closer.

"Yes, everything is fine."

A few days had passed since Mosswing confronted Rowanfang, and

he still hadn't stopped by to see the kits. They were getting more active with each passing day, but they still didn't have names. Mosswing wanted Rowanfang to be involved with the naming, but she had to accept that it wasn't happening. She sat near the entrance of the nursery while her kits slept, the day before Fawnsky had given birth as well, a tom and a she-cat just like Mosswing. Seeing how Sunstorm cared for them gave her mixed feelings, seeing that Fawnsky had two healthy kits gave her so much joy, but she also faced twisting jealousy. She wanted a mate who loved her kits as much as she did.

Fawnsky looked over at the two new kits, the tom was a brown tom named Jaggedkit, for his spiky looking fur and the other was a golden-brown she-cat named Maplekit. Mosswing wished she could find names for her two little kits, but nothing seemed right. She peered out the nursery entrance.

She could hear coughing, greencough was starting to run into the camp. She could only prey to StarClan that the sickness would stay away from the nursery. *Perhaps Rowanfang is right.* The thought intruded her mind and she shook away. *No!* Rowanfang wasn't right, and she wouldn't give up on her kits, ever.

Mosswing heard the fluttering of wings, she looked up to see a small robin, perched on the branch of the looming elm tree that shadowed over the camp. Mosswing watched the robin, and a feeling of warmth washed over her, no matter what happened. With or without Rowanfang, Mosswing and the rest of LichenClan's kits would be just fine.

Chapter 1

Jaggedkit prepared himself to pounce, unsheathing his claws as they scraped against the bottom of the nursery floor. He narrowed his amber eyes, zoning in on his defenseless prey. He waggled his hind quarters, tail twitching with anticipation. Jaggedkit pounced, paws forward and ready to attack. His paws hit his target's back, a mass of golden-brown fur. His weight fell upon hers, causing the two to roll across the nursery floor.

"Hey!" Cried Jaggedkit's sister as he landed on top of her, laughing.

"I got you, Maplekit!" He taunted, pinning her down on the nursery floor, claiming his victory.

"You only got me," Maplekit heaved, shoving Jaggedkit off of her, he landed with a thud on the ground but got back up to his paws, shaking his pelt free of moss strands. "Because you're so bulky!"

Jaggedkit sneered. "Bulky is another word for muscly." He held his head high. Suddenly, a weight over took him, squashing him against the floor with a mass of dark brown fur.

"It's a good thing I'm even bulkier than you!" He heard the taunting voice of Elmkit, one of Jaggedkit's four denmates. Jaggedkit stood up, throwing Elmkit off. Elmkit landed in a pile of moss, still laughing.

Jaggedkit sat up and attempted to flatten his spiky fur. "Now *you're* just a big furball." He flattened down a piece of fur on his chest.

Elmkit padded over to Jaggedkit and Maplekit with a swagger in his step, he lashed his tail. "You're just jealous cause I'm bigger, older and cooler than you." His amber eyes sparkled with mischief.

Jaggedkit shoved down the arrogant tom. "You're like, four days older than me." He pinned Elmkit down who just laughed.

"Four days that still matter, you furball!" Elmkit shoved him away and rose to his paws, he stretched out, extending his claws for a moment.
"Toms are *so* full of themselves." Maplekit said, wrapping her tail around Jaggedkit's shoulders. "She-cats have so much more grace and composure. Right, Robinkit?" Over in Elmkit's nest, sat up a small, dark brown she-cat with green eyes. She padded over to the other three kits.

"Of course." She mewed with a twinge of laughter in her mew, her whiskers twitching. For some reason, Robinkit was a lot smaller than even Maplekit, but she still liked to play. "While these two are off trying to make their egos bigger, we'll be busy being the best warriors in LichenClan!"

"That's right!" Maplekit bounded off to stand by Robinkit, the two she-cats giggling together. Jaggedkit rolled his eyes, she-cats were so lame. He turned back to Elmkit.

"We'll be the best warriors in the *forest!*" He boasted, nudging Elmkit who laughed in agreement.

"You'll have to become apprentices first." A soft voice spoke behind him, Jaggedkit turned around to see his mother, Fawnsky looking at the four kits with soft eyes. "A day that can't come soon enough."

Jaggedkit heard the teasing tone in her voice, and he padded towards her into her nest. He placed his paws on her shoulder, giving her a light shove. "But you love us, right?" He gazed cheekily up at his mother.

"More than all the prey in the forest." Fawnsky nudged Jaggedkit causing him to tumble back into the nest. "Even the two of you." She motioned down at Elmkit and Robinkit.

"Just as I love the four of you as well." Mosswing lifted her head, green eyes gentle. "You might as well be littermates, you were all born so close together." Jaggedkit looked over at Maplekit, Elmkit and Robinkit, he felt a strong surge of love towards the other three kits. He climbed out of the nest and stood beside them.

"You're all getting so big." Fawnsky purred.

"They're only a moon old, Fawnsky." Mosswing laughed, moving closer to Fawnsky.

"You have to admit it feels like it's been longer." Fawnsky added. "Why don't we let them play in the snow? They're a moon old and they've never been outside the nursery."

Jaggedkit's heart skipped a beat when his mother spoke of them leaving the nursery. He had always wanted to see the outside!

"I don't think that's the greatest idea.." Mosswing's eyes were unsure, she looked at her two kits. "It's cold out."

"There's no whitecough in the camp, they should be alright if they play out in the snow for just a moment." Fawnsky assured her friend. "We'll keep an eye on them." Mosswing hesitated but finally nodded.

"Very well, you can go outside but not for very long." Mosswing mewed, her eyes still unsure. Jaggedkit jumped up in excitement, not waiting for the rest of the kits to follow him out as they tumbled into the snow. The icy powder was high, it went half-way up Jaggedkit's legs, and almost up to Robinkit's belly.

"Take this!" Elmkit mewed, throwing a flurry of snow Jaggedkit. Jaggedkit winced as he was showered with cold, he hissed playfully and jumped through the snow, tackling Elmkit into the snow. It was cold, but fun to play in.

Elmkit struggled out of Jaggedkit's grasp and shoved him away. Jaggedkit stumbled back, kicking up snow as he did so. He dropped into a playful stance and stared down Elmkit, preparing to attack again as she shook the snow from his red-brown fur. Before he could pounce, however, Jaggedkit felt a weight on his back and looked over to see Robinkit on his shoulders. "Got you!" She declared, latching on tightly.

Jaggedkit bucked, trying to get the kit off of his back. "You're a sticky little thing!" He hissed playfully. As he attempted to buck her

off, he was shoved into a snowbank by Elmkit. Both Jaggedkit and Robinkit fell into the deep snow. There was a brief moment of panic, but Jaggedkit quickly saw the light and poked his head out of the snow.

Robinkit was still under the snow, but after digging for a moment he saw her breach as well. Her green eyes were full of laughter and joy, she jumped back onto Jaggedkit's shoulders, laughing with delight. He jumped through the snow, knocking her off but she instantly jumped back on.

"You're like a tick!" He laughed, pushing her off once more. Robinkit just kept getting back up, Jaggedkit admired that about her.

"Don't call my sister a tick." Elmkit teased, and jumped forward pushing Jaggedkit back under the snow. He was starting to shiver, but he didn't want to go back inside.

"Don't push my brother!" Maplekit taunted, jumping and shoving Elmkit. The red-brown tom landed in the snow right beside Jaggedkit. While Elmkit was getting back on his paws, Jaggedkit tackled him and the two rolled through the snow. Jaggedkit bounced off his friend and jumped away, shaking the snow that clung to his thick fur.

Elmkit surfaced shortly after, experiencing the same problem as Jaggedkit, but all four kits were laughing. Maplekit's laughs were interrupted by a sneeze that nearly knocked her off her paws. She balanced herself, only to sneeze again. Jaggedkit looked at her with a hint of concern, was she getting sick?

"Alright," Fawnsky said from the nursery, stepping outside. "I heard a sneeze, that means it's time to come inside and get warm for the night. Jaggedkit was a bit disappointed, but he didn't want Maplekit to get sick. With a few complaining mews from Elmkit, the kits journeyed back inside the nursery.

As Jaggedkit cuddled against his mother and sister he was suddenly grateful for the warmth they both provided. He pressed against Maplekit, who quickly fell asleep, exhausted from playing in the

snow. Jaggedkit looked across the nursery at Mosswing, Robinkit and Elmkit. Robinkit was already asleep as well but he could tell that Elmkit was still awake.

"Hey." Jaggedkit whispered, getting Elmkit's attention. Elmkit looked up with attentive amber eyes. Jaggedkit batted over a moss ball at him and Elmkit batted it back. This continued between the two toms for a while until Fawnsky let out a slight hiss.

"Go to sleep, you two." She scolded, snatching up the ball of moss and taking it away. Jaggedkit and Elmkit chuckled, but Jaggedkit turned away and closed his eyes. He was grateful he not only had a sister, but essentially had another sister and a brother.

As he drifted off to sleep, Jaggedkit wished to himself that he, Maplekit, Elmkit and Robinkit would do everything together. They would train as apprentices together, and as warriors they would hunt and fight together. Jaggedkit soon fell asleep, dreaming of adventures to come.

Chapter 2

Jaggedkit woke up to coughing. He opened his amber eyes and looked around the nursery, trying to see where it was coming from. However, each of the cats in the nursery slept soundly. He peered outside, seeing that it was just barely dawn and the coughing was coming from outside the nursery. The snow was still thick on the ground and the air was incredibly cold, Jaggedkit pressed against his mother and sister, trying to keep warm.

The coughing, however, continued and kept Jaggedkit awake. Where was it coming from? Who was sick? He looked at Maplekit who was sleeping soundly. It had been a moon since they played in the snow, and her sneezes only lasted two days, but Fawnsky and Mosswing were both unsure about sending them out again. Part of Jaggedkit wanted to complain about it, but the other part didn't want Maplekit, Robinkit and Elmkit to get sick. He rested his chin on his paws, and decided to just lie down until one of his denmates woke up.

It took a while, but Robinkit was the first one awake, she sat up with a yawn and looked down at her brother for a moment before smoothing down her fur. Jaggedkit sat up as well, getting her attention. Robinkit let out a purr and stepped over Elmkit who let out a snore, she laughed quietly and moved over to Jaggedkit.

"How long have you been awake?" She questioned as they sat near the entrance to the nursery.

"Since dawn." Jaggedkit replied, looking out into the camp. The coughing he had heard earlier continued, he noticed Robinkit's ears twitch.

"Is someone sick?" She questioned.

"I think so." Jaggedkit replied, still wondering who it was and if there more than just one. When Maplekit had her sniffles, Fawnsky and Mosswing educated the four kits about whitecough and

greencough and the lesson had stuck with Jaggedkit, he wondered if it stuck with the others as well.

"I hope that whoever is sick is alright." Robinkit mewed, her voice somewhat sad. Jaggedkit heard rustling behind him and looked over his shoulder to see that Maplekit had woken up. She sat up, letting out a large yawn and looked at Robinkit and Jaggedkit.

"What are you two doing?"She questioned, her voice groggy.

"Just talking." Jaggedkit replied, padding over to his sleepy sister. "Sleep well?" He questioned.

Maplekit nodded. "I heard coughing." She said, looking at Robinkit and Elmkit. "Is someone in here sick?"

Jaggedkit shook his head. "Someone out there." He motioned towards camp. Maplekit looked out the nursery entrance, twitching her tail. After a moment she shrugged and looked over at Elmkit.

"He's so lazy." She said playfully.

"Coming from the cat who just woke up?" Jaggedkit teased. Maplekit snorted and shoved him lightly.

"I see you lot are awake now." A sleepy mew came from Fawnsky, she hadn't opened her eyes yet but she had a pleasant expression.

"Elmkit isn't." Maplekit replied. "Just us three." As if on cue, Elmkit turned over in his nest, letting out a groan. Robinkit trotted over to her brother and poked him in the side.

"Hey!" Elmkit jumped awake, hissing at his sister. "Rude." He grumbled before flopping back into his nest.

"Wake up, sleepyhead." Maplekit mewed. "We have things to do!"

"Like what?" Elmkit growled, covering his eyes with one paw.

"Kit stuff. We have games to play." Elmkit peered out from under his paw at Maplekit who eagerly faced him. With a growl, Elmkit sat up. His fur poked out in several directions.

"Do you fight badgers in your sleep?" Jaggedkit joked.

Elmkit sneered. "Yeah, and I win. Unlike you and your porcupine fur." Jaggedkit hissed at him.

"My fur is naturally spiky, you just wake up like that."He retorted, self-consciously trying to smooth down his spiky fur.

"Whatever." Elmkit yawned. Jaggedkit was still looking away when he heard a small cough. Jaggedkit realized that this time it was *inside* the nursery. All eyes turned to Robinkit who was coughing beside her brother.

Mosswing lifted her head, green eyes filled with concern for her daughter. "Robinkit? What's wrong?" She stood up, moving over to the red-brown she-cat.

"I don't know." Robinkit said between coughs. "My throat hurts, it started hurting last night but I thought it was just the cold."

"I'm going to get Sagefeather." Mosswing mewed, moving towards the nursery entrance. "I'll be right back." Mosswing vanished into the snow and Jaggedkit turned to Robinkit. There was fear and unease in her green eyes, Elmkit pressed against his sister and Fawnsky pulled Jaggedkit and Maplekit close.

Mosswing returned quickly with a fluffy gray she-cat beside her. The LichenClan medicine cat, Sagefeather. "What's wrong?" Sagefeather questioned, looking at Robinkit.

"Robinkit started coughing." Mosswing replied, her voice panicked.

"Coughing doesn't always mean greencough." Sagefeather replied, nudging Elmkit away as she looked at Robinkit. The medicine cat touched her nose to Robinkit's forehead and pulled away with a sigh that sent chills down Jaggedkit's spine. "She has a fever."

"What does that mean?" It was Elmkit who asked, he jumped to his paws and faced the medicine cat. "Don't you have herbs to treat her? She'll be okay right?"

"I have herbs, yes." Sagefeather replied. "But I don't have a lot of

catmint, we have a lot of sick cats right now."

"Who's all sick?" Fawnsky asked, concern lining her mew.

"Patchfoot, Birdstar, Krestleflame, Breezefall, Daisypaw, Fieldpaw, and all three of the elders." Jaggedkit just now noticed the look of exhaustion on Sagefeather's face. That many cats were sick? He pressed against Maplekit who pressed back. After a few moments of tense silence, Sagefeather turned to Mosswing. "I'm going to take her to my den."

"What? You said that coughing didn't mean whitecough!" Mosswing complained, her eyes filling with pain.

"It doesn't, but in this case it does. Robinkit has whitecough and she needs to be in my den with me so I can watch over her and make sure it doesn't get worse. Also to make sure it doesn't spread to the other three kits." Sagefeather explained, Jaggedkit looked at Robinkit who looked terrified, the tiny she-cat was trembling.

"Can I come with her?" Mosswing questioned. "She needs her mother."

"So does Elmkit." Sagefeather snapped, silencing Mosswing. "I will take care of Robinkit, she doesn't need your milk but she needs herbs. You have another kit, don't forget about him. Keep him calm and take care of him in here."

"I'm going with my sister!" Elmkit hissed, stepping in front of his mother. "You can't take her from me."

Sagefeather sighed, then faced Elmkit. "Elmkit, listen to me." Her blue eyes grew serious. "You have to stay here, Robinkit will be best taken care of the in medicine cat den. Both Stormpaw and I can keep an eye on her and help her get better. It's not greencough yet, she has a chance to live." Sagefeather glanced over at Jaggedkit and Maplekit, then back to Elmkit. "You have two other kits in here as well who are just as scared for Robinkit. You need to be with them, and you need to take care of your mother while I care for Robinkit, okay?"

Elmkit lowered his ears and looked towards the ground. "Okay." He muttered, sounding defeated.

"Thank you, Elmkit." Sagefeather mewed softly.

"Don't worry, Elmkit." Robinkit mewed to her brother, causing him to look up at her. "I'll be okay, I know Sagefeather will take care of me."

"You will, won't you?" Jaggedkit suddenly spoke, he couldn't hide his fears about Robinkit any longer. He had heard the coughing in camp and it sounded bad.

"Of course I will." Sagefeather dipped her head. "It's my job, and I will do everything in my power to make sure that Robinkit lives."

"Thank you, Sagefeather." Mosswing mewed, her voice trembling. "Let me know if anything happens with her?"

"Of course." Sagefeather turned to Robinkit. "Are you ready? You can climb on my back so you don't have to walk through the snow."

Robinkit looked excited, or at least she pretended to as she climbed onto Sagefeather's back. The medicine cat stepped out of the den and both she and Robinkit vanished from sight, leaving the nursery in a sad silence.

"I shouldn't have let them go out into the snow." Fawnsky said sadly, breaking the silence.

Mosswing stepped towards her friend, touching her nose to Fawnsky's cheek. "I don't think that this happened because of that. It's been a moon since then and Maplekit only had the sniffles. Leaf-bare is a hard time to have kits." Her eyes grew incredibly sad. "I know Sagefeather will take care of her, and she will be okay."

The rest of the day went on very slowly, the kits didn't play. Jaggedkit stayed close to Maplekit, secretly grateful that it wasn't Maplekit who was sick, but he couldn't imagine how Elmkit was feeling. He hadn't spoke a word since Robinkit went with Sagefeather. "You lot should get some sleep." Fawnsky mewed. "Tomorrow we will ask Sagefeather about Robinkit."

Elmkit didn't respond. "I don't want to go to bed. Not without Robinkit, I can't sleep without her."

Jaggedkit watched as Mosswing picked up Elmkit, who seemed quite surprised. He looked at his mother as she placed him beside Jaggedkit and Maplekit. "Tonight, I think we all need someone to sleep beside." Mosswing laid down next to Fawnsky and the two she-cats pulled all three of the kits in close. Jaggedkit looked at Elmkit who had sadness deep in his eyes, he pressed against his best friend and the three of them laid down together.

Jaggedkit was surrounded by his friends and his family, but it still felt incomplete without Robinkit. He closed his eyes, trying to enjoy the warmth and closeness, praying to StarClan that when he woke up, Robinkit would be okay.

Chapter 3

The nursery had become a very quiet place, Jaggedkit, Elmkit and Maplekit didn't do much playing. They only did a lot of worrying and thinking. It had been almost half a moon since Robinkit left the nursery to be cared for by Sagefeather, and none of the kits or their mothers had stopped worrying. Mosswing would check on her almost every day but she came back when the same news: "She's not any better."

Jaggedkit couldn't stop thinking about Robinkit, each time he heard movement outside he expected it to be Sagefeather with Robinkit bouncing back inside, as energetic as she had been before. He rested his head on his paws, looking at Elmkit who was sitting in silence, staring at his paws.

Jaggedkit worried about Elmkit the most, the once bold and confident kit was now sullen and silent, his eyes as far away as StarClan. Jaggedkit jumped, lifting his head when he heard someone entering the nursery. When he looked up it wasn't Sagefeather or Robinkit, instead it was his father, Sunstorm. His father looked at him and Maplekit with loving amber eyes, and extended the same glance to Fawnsky.

"Hello, everyone." He mewed softly. "Are we keeping our heads up in here.?" He brushed his golden tail under Jaggedkit's chin. Jaggedkit failed to keep his head high, he looked away in sadness.

"We're trying to." Fawnsky replied, Jaggedkit noticed she was looking at both him and Maplekit.

"Is there any news about any other cats with the sickness?" Mosswing asked, looking towards Sunstorm with fearful eyes. Sunstorm let out a sigh, looking at his paws.

"Tigercloud died and Birdstar lost a life." Sunstorm explained, his voice dark. Jaggedkit stared, their leader had lost a life?

"That's so horrible." Fawnsky lowered her head.

"Sagefeather is worried that Birdstar might lose more than one, she's really ill."

"She's an old she-cat." Fawnsky mewed. "She was leader long before my parents were born."

Mosswing's face was hidden, clearly she was terrified about her daughter getting as sick as Birdstar.

"However," Sunstorm added, his voice growing lighter. "All the sickest cats have been moved to the abandoned badger den outside of camp. "But Robinkit and a few others are still in the medicine cat den."

"She still only has whitecough." Mosswing added solemnly. "But it's not getting any better." Her voice shook. "But it could get worse if not treated soon." She looked up, Jaggedkit felt pain when he saw the look in her eyes. "Is there still catmint?"

Sunstorm slowly shook his head. "From what I hear, not a lot." Mosswing winced as if Sunstorm had hit her, she looked at Elmkit who was still silent.

Jaggedkit felt himself and Maplekit being pulled closer to Fawnsky. Jaggedkit looked at Elmkit, he let out a sigh then looked at Sunstorm. "How come my father hasn't visited us? I can't remember the last time he actually came to visit us. You'd think he could at least spare a visit while Robinkit is dying."

Jaggedkit was taken aback by Elmkit's words and tone, none of them had mentioned the fact that Robinkit was dying, none of them wanted to. Mosswing looked at Elmkit in horror and sadness. Elmkit looked over his shoulder at her. "Well?" He questioned. "Why hasn't he?"

Mosswing lowered her head, looking defeated. "I don't know, Elmkit." She breathed out, exasperated. Elmkit's eyes filled with pain, he seemed to be realizing how painful his words had been. Elmkit stood up and nestled in against his mother who pulled him

close.

Jaggedkit felt Maplekit's head rest on his back, she was trembling slightly. Jaggedkit looked at the ground, wondering how they would manage if Robinkit died? It was hard enough with her being outside of the den. Could they manage if she died? There would only be three of them as apprentices, not four. They wouldn't become warriors together, they wouldn't hunt or fight together.

"I should go." Sunstorm touched his nose to Fawnsky's. "I'll come right back if I hear anything more." He looked at Mosswing for a moment before turning back to his mate. "I love you." He said quietly before vanishing into the camp. Jaggedkit looked at his mother, her green eyes stared sadly out the nursery entrance. Jaggedkit situated himself so that he was curled up against Maplekit and his mother.

He didn't sleep, he just stared outside the nursery entrance. Sometimes, he would see cats pass by but none of them looked very happy. Robinkit wasn't the only was sick, and they weren't the only ones in danger of losing a loved one. Birdstar had loved ones, so did Tigercloud. Jaggedkit knew that Fieldpaw had a sister, was she just as nervous as the kits were? What would happen to LichenClan if all the sick cats died?

Jaggedkit didn't realize he had fallen asleep, it didn't feel like he had. He woke up with his head foggy and thick with sleep. He looked over at Elmkit who appeared to be sleeping, but Jaggedkit saw him blink. Jaggedkit wished he could be more help to his friend, but he didn't know what to do.

Jaggedkit heard pawsteps in the snow, approaching the medicine cat den. All the other cats in the nursery heard it as well, their heads lifted expantly. For the first time in a long time, it was Sagefeather. Jaggedkit's heart instantly lifted, he looked around the fluffy white she-cat for Robinkit but didn't see any sign of her. Then Jaggedkit saw her face.

Her eyes were clouded with sadness and her head hung low, pain ripped through Jaggedkit's heart and he could feel Maplekit tense beside him. "Sagefeather...?" Mosswing asked, but something told

Jaggedkit they all already knew what she was hear to tell them.

Jaggedkit didn't want to listen, he didn't want to hear the news that they had been fearing. *If I don't hear it.* He told himself. *It's not true. It can't be true!*

"I'm so sorry." Sagefeather's voice trembled. "Robinkit passed in her sleep last night, there was nothing we could do."

"She only had whitecough." Mosswing said, her voice trembling. "Sunstorm told us that she wasn't with the sickest cats. I thought she would be okay."

"I'm so sorry, Mosswing." Sagefeather hung her head low. Jaggedkit felt as if heart had broken into a million pieces. Maplekit buried her head into Jaggedkit's shoulder, he pressed against his sister. In this moment, he never wanted her to leave his side. He looked over at Elmkit, he sat alone with his head low.

He needs his sister. Jaggedkit thought, pain driving through his heart. He nudged Maplekit, she looked up with grief filled eyes. He motioned towards Elmkit, sitting all alone. Maplekit understood instantly. The two of them stood up and padded across the nursery to Elmkit where each of them pressed against him, keeping him close.

Elmkit let out a wail and fell to the ground, being held close by Jaggedkit and Maplekit. He buried his face in Jaggedkit's fur and trembled in between them. Together, the three kits shared their pain. Jaggedkit didn't know what to do, he didn't know what they would do. The same fears that had haunted him the night before were now a reality, a reality none of them would ever escape.

Jaggedkit vaguely heard Sagefeather leave, he did notice that Mosswing had pulled all three kits closer and Fawnsky laid on the other side of them. Jaggedkit, Elmkit and Maplekit were surrounded by love, warmth and pain. Jaggedkit got as close as he could the cats around him, his heart aching and his mind praying that this was all a dream, that he would open his eyes and Robinkit would be right in front of them, but deep down he knew that she was gone forever.

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Jaggedkit heard voices. His ears twitched, figuring that it was just some of his Clanmates talking near the nursery. Then he felt a breeze, which he shouldn't have. Jaggedkit opened his eyes to see Mosswing was no longer in the nursery, instead he, Elmkit and Maplekit were cuddle up against Fawnsky. He was glad to see that both were sleeping, but he still wondered where Mosswing was.

Jaggedkit strained his ears to try and hear what the two cats were talking about. He soon recognized the familiar, sweet voice of Mosswing, but the other voice was unfamiliar to him. Jaggedkit looked around, trying to stand up without waking up any of the cats. He stood up slowly and crept to the edge of the nursery entrance where he saw Mosswing facing a dark brown tom that Jaggedkit didn't recognize.

"I told you this would happen, Mosswing." The tom said, his voice an angered hiss that made Jaggedkit feel uncomfortable. Why was the time talking to her that way?

Mosswing was visibly hurt by his words. "You think I asked for this happen?" Her voice trembled. "Our daughter is dead!" She cried. Jaggedkit realized with a shock that this was Elmkit's and Robinkit's father, Rowanfang. "And you don't seem to care."

"I told you when they were born, you never should've had kits in leaf-bare, ,this is what happens!" Rowanfang spat. "Kits die."

"Jaggedkit, Maplekit and Elmkit didn't get sick!" She wailed. "It's not my fault that she got sick or that she died! I didn't ask to have kits in leaf-bare, it's just how it happened. It's not just my fault I had kits, at least I've been there for them! Yesterday, Elmkit asked me why has father never visited his dying kit!"

"Because I have better things to do." Rowanfang growled, both to Jaggedkit's and Mosswing's shock. Mosswing let out a pained gasp.

"What could be more important than your daughter's life? Or your son's fears? Sunstorm has been a better father to them!" Mosswing was struggling, her legs trembled.

"Did you ever think I never even wanted to be a father?" Rowanfang raised his voice. "Because I didn't! You and your friend were so obsessed with having kits, that I did what you asked but I *never* wanted kits. Not with you or any other cat."

Mosswing looked as if she had been clawed by this cat, Jaggedkit had to stop himself from attacked this stupid tom cat. Anger boiled inside him, how dare this cat talk about Mosswing and his kits like this?

There was a moment of silence between the two cats, Mosswing's head was low, after a moment she looked up with a fiery rage inside her eyes that could melt the snow around them. "You didn't want kits? Fine then." Her voice was cold, it made Jaggedkit's fur stand on edge. "You don't have any. You don't have kits and you don't have a mate."

"Mosswi--"

"No!" She spat, causing Rowanfang to take a step back. "You didn't want them so you don't *deserve* them. Elmkit will be leader one day, I can see it in his eyes. He doesn't need you, and neither do I! From this day on, you are dead to me to Rowanfang. Do not speak to me and do not speak to Elmkit. I will teach him that you are not his father, that he doesn't need a father, especially not one like you."

Rowanfang's entire body tensed. "Fine!" He spat. "I didn't want anything to do with him anyway, and now I don't want anything to do with you. Your kits ruined you, Mosswing."

"No, Rowanfang." Mosswing mewed. "These kits changed me, they made my life better than you ever could. I'm not ashamed that you're their father, I'm ashamed that you treated them in such a way, but no more. Leave, Rowanfang. And don't show your face near the nursery again."

Rowanfang turned away with a hiss, kicking up snow as he trudged away, leaving Mosswing alone in the cold. She stood there, her breath billowing out in a cloud in front of her. Was she going to come in? Jaggedkit couldn't wait any longer, he jumped out of the nursery and into the snow. "You can't stay out here." He mewed,

Mosswing looked up in shock.

"Jaggedkit?" She blinked, then looked away. "Did you hear that conversation?" She asked, her voice breaking.

"I did." Jaggedkit replied, padding through the snow to face the queen. "I'm sorry Elmkit's father is such a jerk. I wanted to claw his stupid ears off." Jaggedkit snorted.

Jaggedkit noticed a slight sparkle of amusement in Mosswing's eyes. Using one paw, she pulled Jaggedkit close, keeping him warm. "I'm sorry you had to see that." She apologized, looking up at the night sky. "It's a lot of issues that you won't understand for a while, and that's okay." She sighed. "All three of you suffered such a loss at a young age, I wish you could've been kits for a little longer."

Jaggedkit looked down at the snow, the stars reflecting off its crystalline surface. "How could we be kits?" He questioned. "Knowing that Robinkit isn't with us anymore? How are we going to train without her? We were supposed to be apprentices and warriors together, all four of us." His heart ached, he wanted the pain to stop.

"I know, Jaggedkit." Her voice trembled. "I would give anything to see Robinkit one last time, to see her playful and happy once more." She lowered her head, wrapping her tail around Jaggedkit. "I want so badly for her to be alive."

Jaggedkit burrowed into the queen's fur, closing his eyes and taking in her warmth. After a few moments of silence, Mosswing spoke. "Jaggedkit, can I ask you something?" Jaggedkit opened his eyes, looking up at Mosswing. "Can you promise me that you'll take care of Elmkit? You kits have always been like siblings, and now he really needs you. He needs both you and Maplekit. I know you need him too."

Jaggedkit thought of Elmkit, sleeping soundly in the nursery with Maplekit and Fawnsky. The look on his face when he heard that his sister had died. Mosswing was right, he did need them. "I promise, Mosswing. I'll take care of him." He closed his eyes. *I'll always take care of you, Elmkit. As if you were my own brother.*

"Thank you." Mosswing's voice was barely above a whisper. "We should go inside. It's cold."

Jaggedkit nodded and the two began walking backs toward the nursery, but Mosswing stopped and looked towards the sky. "There's another star in StarClan tonight." She whispered, Jaggedkit wasn't sure if she was talking to him or not. "Leaf-bare is a horrible season, but just as the leaf-bare brings death, newleaf brings life. This season will pass, as will this pain, and I know that both the forest, and the ones I love will be okay."

Chapter 4

Jaggedkit sat in the sunlight, peering out into the Clan camp. The snow was slowly starting to melt, and newleaf was finally here. He breathed in the fresh air, thankful that it didn't burn and sting his nose. It had been a moon since Robinkit's death, and the three kits were only days away from becoming apprentices. He wasn't sure how he felt about it, he couldn't stop thinking of the fact that Robinkit would never receive her apprentice name.

He stared at his paws, unable to focus on anything else. Behind him, Jaggedkit heard pawsteps. He lifted his head and glanced behind him, it was Elmkit. "Hey." He mewed, his voice low.

"Hi." Jaggedkit sighed.

"Thinking about Robinkit?"

"Always." Jaggedkit looked out towards the sky.

"Me too." Elmkit's gaze was distant. "But we'll be apprentices in a few days, we will have a duty to our Clan."

"I know."

"We can't let this distract us from our duties," Elmkit mewed, sounding a lot more mature than he looked. Jaggedkit turned his head to look at his friend. "Robinkit would want us to become warriors, for her. Before she died, Robinkit and I had talked about becoming leader. I don't think she wanted to, but she wanted me to."

"I know you could become leader." Jaggedkit mewed. "You're incredible."

"What about you?" Elmkit questioned curiously. "Do you want to be leader?"

"Maybe." Jaggedkit shrugged.

"Well, how about this: If I become leader, I'll make you my deputy and you become leader you'll make me your deputy."

Jaggedkit purred at the thought of leading LichenClan with his best friend. "It's a deal."

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"If you don't calm down then I can't smoothe down your fur!" Fawnsky complained as Maplekit squirmed under her.

"You didn't wash, Jaggedkit's fur!" She pointed with one paw towards Jaggedkit who sat beside a freshly groomed Elmkit beside Mosswing.

"That's not true!" Jaggedkit complained, puffing out his spiky fur.

"I tried to," Fawnsky replied with a hefty lick to Maplekit's head. "There's no smoothing down that fur, I just hope they'll go away." She purred with amusement and lightly pushed Maplekit towards Elmkit and Jaggedkit. "Now go out there! It's time!"

The three kits looked at each other, sharing looks of excitement and bounded out of the nursery into the LichenClan camp. Jaggedkit breathed in the fresh air of newleaf and walked side by side with his sister and best friends towards the High Stump in the middle of camp. Birdstar noticed them from her den and began walking there as well.

"Let all cats old enough to catch their own prey gather around the High Stump for a Clan meeting!" Her voice echoed throughout the camp, calling the cats of LichenClan to the center. Jaggedkit felt both nerves and excitement tingling in his paws with each step. Today was they day they would finally become apprentices! Deep inside him, however, there was a longing for Robinkit. He wanted so badly for her to experience this ceremony alongside her family, but he remembered his and his denmates' promise: to be happy for Robinkit, for she was watching them from StarClan.

Jaggedkit sat in between Elmkit and Maplekit before Birdstar. Elmkit held his head high and his amber eyes shimmered and

Maplekit's eyes glittered with excitement. Jaggedkit held himself high beside them as Birdstar began to speak.

"Today is proud day for LichenClan, by naming apprentices we show that we remain strong for many moons to come. These kits have waited six long moons and it's time for them to receive their apprentice names." Birdstar's amber eyes glowed brightly. "Elmkit, from this day forward until you have earned you have earned your warrior name, you will be known as Elmpaw." Elmpaw's eyes glowed brighter than the sun. "Skytail, you have proven to be a strong and resourceful warrior and I know you will be a wonderful mentor to Elmpaw."

Skytail, a gray tabby tom stepped forward and touched noses with his new apprentice. Elmpaw stepped back into the crowd sitting beside his new mentor. "Jaggedkit." Jaggedkit's attention was pulled away from Elmpaw and back to Birdstar. "From this day forward, until you have earned your warrior name you be known as Jaggedpaw. Hareclaw, you are a brave and honorable warrior, I trust you will teach Jaggedpaw everything you know."

A brown warrior with joy-filled green eyes stepped forward, Hareclaw. Jaggedpaw eagerly touched noses with his new mentor and sat beside Skytail and Elmpaw. He looked past Maplekit and noticed Sunstorm and Fawnsky sitting close beside each other, their tails intertwined and looking at their kits lovingly. Mosswing sat beside them, but Rowanfang was nowhere to be seen. However, Mosswing had enough love in her eyes for both of them.

"Maplekit." Jaggedpaw noticed his sister twitch with excitement. "From this day forward, until you have earned your warrior name, you will be known as Maplepaw. Cedarcloud is a confident and intelligent cat and I know she will teach you everything she knows."

Cedarcloud was a brown tabby she-cat with gentle blue eyes, she stepped forward and touched noses with Maplepaw and the two joined Elmpaw and Jaggedpaw. "Elmpaw! Jaggedpaw! Maplepaw!" The Clan cheered their names and Jaggedpaw held his head high and enjoy the cheers from his Clanmates.

"So what should we do first?." Cedarcloud mewed to the other two

mentors. "How about an exploration of the territory, with all of us?" Jaggedpaw shared an excited glance with Elmpaw, this is exactly what they wanted. To do their apprenticeship together.

"Sounds like good plan to me." Skytail nodded.

"Then let's go!" Hareclaw said enthusiastically. Hareclaw took the lead and Skytail, Cedarcloud and the apprentices followed behind. They headed for the camp's main entrance, passing the warriors and apprentice dens on the way out. Gingerpaw sat outside the apprentice den, looking at them eagerly.

"I'll make sure you all have nests when you get back! And then you can get to know all the other apprentices." The she-cat purred and Jaggedpaw nodded to her. The group of cats pushed their way through the thick cluster of brambles that protected the entrance, Jaggedpaw half-expected it to hurt, but he just felt slight tugging on his fur.

"Where should we go first?" Hareclaw questioned, looking at his fellow mentors.

"We could go through the swampland and show the them the border of the gathering hollow and MoonClan's border." Skytail suggested.

"Swampland?" Elmpaw echoed. "That doesn't sound very nice." He wrinkled his nose, and Maplepaw nodded.

"You think that now." Cedarcloud mewed as they padded through the thick forest. "But I think you'll find that you enjoy more than you think."

Elmpaw looked unconvinced but didn't say anything else. Jaggedpaw personally didn't know what to think of swampland, he didn't even know that LichenClan territory had a swamp. He looked around the territory, feeling protected but the coverage of the towering trees and thick flora.

"LichenClan has the densest forest of all four Clans, even SunClan. Most cats don't like to come here because it can be dangerous to

those who don't know it." Skytail explained. "So you won't often seeing cats attacking us much farther than our border."

"Will we get invaded?" Elmpaw questioned, also looking around the forest, his ears twitching.

"It's hard to say. You'll see the border with MoonClan here a moment, and they don't often cross it." Skytail replied, leading them farther into the thick forest. In the distance, Jaggedpaw heard the bubbling sound of a river through the trees. The group of cats broke through the trees where the river was.

"Across this river is the Gathering Hollow," Cedarcloud mewed. "That's where we hold our gatherings every full moon."

"How do we cross?" Maplepaw asked, looking at the gentle flowing water, her eyes slightly concerned.

"We walk." Skytail mewed, stepping forward and stepping into the water, it went up to his belly fur.

"I'm not walking in that." Elmpaw said, stepping with with his nose wrinkled. "What about in leaf-bare, or when it's raining?"

Hareclaw chuckled. "At times when it's too cold or when it's over flowing there is a place downstream that we can cross by jumping. I think you'll find, however, that the water feels quite nice. MoonClan think themselves the only ones who enjoy water, but LichenClan cats enjoy getting their paws wet every once in awhile. I think you will too." With a flick of his tail, Hareclaw continued walking along the rocky shore of the river. Jaggedpaw walked behind his mentor and beside Maplepaw.

He walked alongside the river, feeling the cold droplets splash his legs every-so-often. He looked at the river, wondering if he ever would enjoy it. With this thick, spiky fur he couldn't imagine himself doing so. With a flick of his ears, Jaggedpaw continued following the rest of his group.

As they walked along the river, Jaggedpaw felt the ground underneath his paws grow wetter, he looked down at his paws and

saw that the forest was starting to turn into a marsh. Glancing forward, he saw the swampland of LichenClan's territory. It extended out towards a branch of the main river with several small pockets of water throughout.

They stepped into the marsh and Jaggedpaw was surprised at the feeling underneath his paws, he enjoyed the cool, soft wetness of the grass. He looked to Elmpaw and Maplepaw and they seemed to be surprised at the feeling as well.

"I don't see you complaining now." Cedarcloud purred, looking over her shoulder at the three apprentices. Elmpaw didn't reply, he just let out a snort and Maplepaw continued looking at the ground.

"We're approaching the MoonClan border." Hareclaw announced. "It's a bit of an odd border." There was a section of the river where it forked into two different, smaller rivers. "This is the border, neither of us cross it very much."

"So what's the border, exactly?" Maplepaw asked, looking at the formation of the rivers. "Is it the river?"

Hareclaw nodded. "Across this smaller river, the one that forks is the border with the MoonClan." He turned to the river that cut in front of the marshland. "And this one is the border to the Spirit Woods." Jaggedpaw glanced across the river, seeing white trees in the distance. "In the Spirit Woods is the the Spirit Tree which houses the Moonstone, where we speak with our warrior ancestors."

"Will we ever get to see it?" Elmpaw questioned, curiosity burning deep within his amber eyes.

"Someday. Every apprentice gets to journey there with the leader of their Clan. You may not see the actual Moonstone but you will see the woods and the tree." Hareclaw explained, then turned to face the apprentices. "Well, it's been quite the adventure." He looked towards the sky. "You three should get some rest, your actual warrior training starts tomorrow."

"What about the rest of the territory? The AshClan border?" Jaggedpaw questioned, stepping forward. He didn't want to go back

to camp, he wanted to see more of LichenClan's territory, he wanted to see it all.

Hareclaw let out a purr of amusement. "Don't worry, Jaggedpaw. You'll see every inch of the territory in time, but you've just became an apprentice. It takes time to learn your territory, but you'll see it all before no time."

Jaggedpaw nodded, but he wasn't satisfied. He wanted more, he didn't want sleep. He wanted to learn how to hunt and fight, his paws itched for more excitement. "Let's go home." Skytail mewed and began leading the group back to camp. "Tomorrow will be even more exciting, trust me."

Chapter 5

Jaggedpaw did his best not to gag at the scent of mouse bile. He looked at the tick buried deep in Rockflower's shoulder. After a few moments, the tick pulled out of her flesh. Jaggedpaw knocked it to the ground and crushed it with his paw. He set the foul stick down and looked over Rockflower's gray pelt. "Is there any more?" He questioned.

"I don't think so." The old she-cat croaked, looking over her own fur. "Thank you, Jaggedpaw, that thing was really buggin' me."

"Maybe now she'll stop complaining about it all the time." Dustfang snorted from the other side of the den, his nose tucked under his tail. "Then again she always has something to complain about."

"Like my rude denmate." Rockflower lashed her tail. Jaggedpaw could tell from their voices that they really didn't hate each other, they were just bantering. *What else do elders have to do?* He thought.

"It's my pleasure." Jaggedpaw looked down at Rockflower. "Hareclaw told me that if I did a good job then I get to go to the gathering tonight."

"I remember my first gathering." Dustfang mewed, sounding nostalgic. "Birdstar wasn't even deputy then!"

"We get it," Rockflower rolled her faded blue eyes. "You're older than dirt."

"I've got more spring in my step then you." Dustfang's head was lifted now and he had green eyes narrowed at Rockflower.

Rockflower let out a deep chuckle then gazed up at Jaggedpaw. "What are you still doing here? Go tell Hareclaw that you have my seal of approval to go the gathering tonight."

"Thank you." Jaggedpaw dipped his head respectfully, grabbed the

bile covered branch and left the elder's den. He disposed of the branch and scanned the camp for Hareclaw. He spotted pale brown tom speaking with Krestleflame near the fresh-kill pile. He padded towards his mentor, Hareclaw noticed and gazed towards Jaggedpaw.

"Did you get all of their ticks?" Hareclaw questioned.

Jaggedpaw nodded. "Dustfang didn't have any and Rockflower had two. She said that I had her seal of approval."

Hareclaw chuckled. "Is that so?" He looked towards Krestleflame who purred with amusement. Hareclaw turned his gaze back to Jaggedpaw. "Very well, Jaggedpaw, you can go to the gathering tonight."

"Thank you so much!" Jaggedpaw nearly jumped in the air, he was so excited. *I'll finally get to see the other Clans!* He turned away, desperately searching for Maplepaw and Elmpaw. He knew that Cedarcloud had told Maplepaw she could go, but he didn't know about Elmpaw just yet.

Jaggedpaw scanned the camp, not spotting Maplepaw or Elmpaw, only Fawnsky who was sitting with Mosswing as usual. He quickly approached the two she-cats. "Have you seen Maplepaw and Elmpaw?" He questioned, trying to keep his voice steady despite his excitement.

"I believe Maplepaw is out hunting." Fawnsky replied. "I saw her, Cedarcloud, Patchfoot and Badgerpaw all leave at about sunhigh. As for Elmpaw, I haven't seen him since this morning when he was with Skytail."

"I think Jumpheart sent both him and Skytail on patrol, they should be back here soon." Mosswing added, her eyes sparkled with interest. "You seem excited." She purred.

"Hareclaw told me that I can go to the gathering tonight." Jaggedpaw shared the news with his mother and Mosswing. "And I want to know if Elmpaw is going."

"I don't see why he wouldn't." Mosswing mewed. "I've heard quite good things from Skytail about him. He's just a little bit too arrogant for his own good."

Jaggedpaw snorted. "A little? He's lucky that he got to go patrol while *I* was stuck dealing with mouse bile and ticks."

Fawnsky flicked her tail across Jaggedpaw's ears. "Those elders have done a lot for your Clan." She mewed, her voice stern but hiding traces of affection. "You should respect them."

"I do." Jaggedpaw glanced back towards the elder's den where Dustfang and Rockflower remained. "They just argue a lot."

"Dustfang and Rockflower have always been at odds." Mosswing replied. "Tigercloud usually kept the peace between them, but without her I'm sure they bicker a bit more."

Jaggedpaw didn't think he ever met Tigercloud, she died of greencough when he was so young. *I bet she was a lovely cat.* He thought solemnly. Jaggedpaw heard the rustling of brambles behind him, he looked over his shoulder to see a patrol entering the camp. It was lead by Featherheart and Sparrowpaw. Behind them was Amberflame, Breezefall, Skytail and finally, Elmpaw.

"There he is." Mosswing purred. "Go and ask him if he's going to the gathering." Jaggedpaw nodded, bid farewell to the two she-cats and quickly ran over to his friend.

"Elmpaw!" He called. The brown tom turned his head and looked at Jaggedpaw excitedly.

"What's up?" Elmpaw questioned as he bounded up to Jaggedpaw.

"Hareclaw said I could go to the gathering tonight, I know Maplepaw is going and I wanted to know if you were too."

Elmpaw held his head high. "I certainly am. Skytail said I behaved well on the patrol so I can go too!"

"That's awesome!" Jaggedpaw jumped around his friend. "We all get to go together!" A thought flashed in Jaggedpaw's mind. *Robinkit*

should be going too. He stopped bounced and calmed himself, pushing the thought away. *She is going with us, she'll be watching from StarClan.*

"I'm so excited." Elmpaw's paws twitched. "We get to see the other Clans. I've only seen an AshClan cat once and it was on patrol, but we get to see the leaders!"

"Do you know their names? I'm pretty sure that Goldenstar is AshClan's leader." Jaggedpaw remembered Hareclaw talking about Goldenstar, a fierce golden she-cat.

"I'm pretty sure that SunClan's leader is Foxstar and MoonClan's is Owlstar." Elmpaw mewed. "I wonder if we'll meet any cool apprentices."

"I hope so." Jaggedpaw wondered if the other Clans had as many apprentices as LichenClan did. Vinetail and Hazelshine had recently become warriors but the apprentice den was still incredibly full.

"Where is Maplepaw." Elmpaw looked around. "I bet she's just as excited as we are!"

"She's out hunting, and I bet she is too!" Jaggedpaw replied. The two toms waited for Maplepaw to returned, she made it back just before the Clan left for the gathering.

Jaggedpaw stuck with Maplepaw, Fawnsky, Sunstorm and Mosswing while the Clan prepared to leave. Most of the Clan appeared to be going. *I don't know why they wouldn't be. It's the prime of greenleaf.*

"If we're all ready to go." Birdstar spoke up. "Then let's head out." Jaggedpaw jumped to his paws, eager to see the gathering hollow and all the other Clans. Birdstar, with Jumpheart at her side, began leading the Clans out of their camp. Jaggedpaw could see that Elmpaw and Maplepaw were just as excited to get to the hollow. He bounded alongside his friends and Clanmates towards the river. He knew they would be crossing through, which he wasn't particularly excited for but he knew he would be just fine.

LichenClan reached the river where Birdstar crossed with ease, followed by Jumpheart and the rest of the warriors. When it came to Jaggedpaw, Maplepaw and Elmpaw, Maplepaw crossed happily. When she reached the other side she shook the water free of her golden brown fur and looked expectantly at Jaggedpaw and Elmpaw.

Elmpaw looked very uncertain, so Jaggedpaw went next. He placed a paw into the river, shivering at the icy cold water. He sucked in his breath and put the next paw in. He could feel the pebbles against the bottom digging into his paw pads. *How can cats possibly like this?* He thought bitterly. The water nearly reached his belly, but Jaggedpaw pushed forward.

Finally, he reached the other side and climbed out, shaking away the water which made his brown fur spike up even more. Beside, Maplepaw laughed. He let out a quiet hiss at her and turned his attention to Elmpaw.

The bold apprentice already had his two front paws in the water, but the look on his face showed that he wasn't happy about it. Elmpaw put the rest of his paws in the water and quickly crossed, climbing out and shaking.

"You two need to learn to love the water." Maplepaw joked as Elmpaw desperately tried to dry his wet fur. "It's great in weather like this!"

"Speak for yourself." Elmpaw growled, flicking his wet tail at Maplepaw. "I like to keep my paws dry.

"Me too." Jaggedpaw replied. "I'm not a MoonClan cat."

"No," Maplepaw brushed up against him. "But you are a LichenClan cat, and we have swamp in our territory. You're gonna have to get used to it."

"You'll get real used to it when I push you in." Jaggedpaw fake attacked his sister, threatening to shove her into the river. Maplepaw squealed and ran around behind Elmpaw.

"He won't protect you." Jaggedpaw dropped into a playful stance. "He'll shove you in too!"

"Knock it off, you three!" A sharp mew came from the group of LichenClan warriors. It was Fawnsky looking at them. "We're going to a gathering, have some composure."

"Sorry." Jaggedpaw ducked his head, his pelt growing hot. He glanced back towards the river where the final cat, Dustfang, was reaching the other side. When the elder crossed, Birdstar led them farther into the trees.

Now walking beside his sister and friend again, Jaggedpaw eagerly looked around. This area had a very interesting scent to it. It smelled like a mixture of all of the Clans, and it just grew stronger the closer they got to the gathering hollow. In the distance, Jaggedpaw could hear voices.

"We're almost there!" Maplepaw said in a hushed whisper. Jaggedpaw and Elmpaw could barely restrain themselves from running ahead of the Clan.

They started walking into the gathering hollow where Jaggedpaw could finally see the cats from the other Clans. There were several of many different shades and sizes. He spotted two cats who looked like apprentices, a golden tabby tom and a ginger she-cat who seemed to be close. They smelled like AshClan as well.

Across the gathering hollow, another Clan was also entering. At the head of it was a large ginger tom with a white tipped tail, beside him was a slender pale gray she-cat. *I don't recognize their scent, that must be SunClan and that ginger tom must be Foxstar!* He watched as Birdstar and Foxstar broke away from their Clans with their deputies and made their way to the trees.

Already at the trees was a bright golden she-cat and a fluffy white tom. *Goldenstar and Owlstar.* Jaggedpaw noted, watching each of them closely. Sagefeather and Stormpaw had also followed the leaders and were with the other medicine cats.

"Alright you three." Jaggedpaw's attention was pulled away from

the leaders and to his mother and Mosswing who looked over Jaggedpaw, Elmpaw and Maplepaw with stern eyes. "Go explore and meet some new cats, but do not start any problems. Don't tell any LichenClan secrets and remember that you can make friends, but you may meet with them in battle so don't get too close." Mosswing explained.

All three apprentices nodded. "Understood." Maplepaw held her head high. "We'll behave!"

"You better." Fawnsky purred before she and Mosswing went to go talk to some she-cats from MoonClan.

"Let's see if we can't meet some cool cats!" Elmpaw urged the other two. "I wanna meet a cat from each Clan."

Jaggedpaw agreed and looked around, unable to tell most cats apart who weren't from LichenClan. He saw Hazelshine talking with a slim brown tom who smelled of AshClan. Not far from her, Poppywing and Ashstream were talking to a white MoonClan she-cat and a golden tom from SunClan.

"Hello there." Jaggedpaw turned his head to see two nearly identical calico she-cats. Both with green eyes, but one of them had pale ginger paws. "I haven't seen you three around here, are you new apprentices?"

"Yep." Maplepaw was the first to respond. "This is our first gathering."

"It's a pleasure to meet you." The other one spoke. "My name is Applepaw and this is my sister, Sandpaw, we're from SunClan."

"It's nice to meet you too." Jaggedpaw dipped his head. "My name is Jaggedpaw, this is my sister, Maplepaw and our friend, Elmpaw. We're from LichenClan."

"That's awesome." Sandpaw purred. "We don't get to see SunClan cats other than at gatherings, so it's always nice to meet them."

"SunClan cats seem nice." Maplepaw added. "At least you two do."

"Most LichenClan cats I've met have been pretty nice." Applepaw mewed.

"Most?" Elmpaw echoed, narrowing his eyes slightly.

"Yeah," Sandpaw chuckled. "At the last gathering, we got yelled at by no reason by a tom named Rowanfang I believe."

Elmpaw snorted, was he upset about them talking about his father like that? Luckily, Elmpaw didn't seem upset at all. "That's my father, he's a bit of a grouch." Jaggedpaw blinked, Elmpaw hadn't seen the argument between Rowanfang and Mosswing when Robinkit died. A grouch was putting it lightly.

"Well you seem much nicer." Sandpaw purred.

"The gathering is starting!" Maplepaw said excitedly and the group of apprentices quickly sat down as the Clans faced their leaders. Jaggedpaw sat between Maplepaw and Sandpaw.

"So who is your deputy?" Jaggedpaw asked Sandpaw under his breath. "It's that gray she-cat right?"

Sandpaw nodded. "That's Mallownose. The MoonClan deputy is Cloudwind, the gray and white she-cat and AshClan's deputy is the gray tabby, Ivyheart."

"Hush!" There was a hiss from a mottled gray tabby she-cat in front of them. Sandpaw flattened her ears.

"Sorry, Fishtail!" Jaggedpaw and Sandpaw shared a chuckle before looking up to the leaders.

"Tonight is a beautiful night." Goldenstar began. "Welcome all to the gathering." The other leaders nodded in agreement. "I'd like to start us off if you don't mind?" She looked to the others.

"Go ahead." Foxstar motioned for Goldenstar to continue. Goldenstar stood up on her branch, overlooking the Clans. The moonlight hit her fur, making her look very bright. *She's..intimidating.* Jaggedpaw thought.

"AshClan welcomes three new warriors tonight, Mousetail, Spiderheart and Hollytail!" Jaggedpaw searched the crowd for the cats and found a black and brown she-cat, a black and white she-cat and the brown tom that Hazelshine had been talking to. They all held their heads high. "Prey has been running exceptionally well in our territory and our warriors are strong."

"Good to hear." Owlstar purred.

"Why don't you go next, Foxstar." Goldenstar looked at the SunClan leader who nodded. Goldenstar sat down and Foxstar stood.

"SunClan doesn't have much news, but greenleaf has provided with plentiful amounts of prey and happy lives. We have a nursery full of kits so expect a lot of news in the coming moons!"

"Kits have always been a blessing." Birdstar mewed, her voice soft. Foxstar sat down and Birdstar stood up. "LichenClan too has warriors to announce. Please welcome Hazelshine and Vinetail!" Jaggedpaw saw his Clanmates, both she-cats were incredibly proud.

"It's our turn!" Elmpaw whispered excitedly as he watched Birdstar with joy.

"We also welcome three new apprentices, Elmpaw, Jaggedpaw and Maplepaw!" As the Clans cheered, Jaggedpaw felt a bit intimidated under all the gazes, but also felt pretty proud. Maplepaw looked bashful, but Elmpaw puffed out his chest. "That's all we have to report."

"That leaves me." Owlstar stood up. "MoonClan also does not have much to announce. The river is full and rabbits are plenty."

"Then this gathering is concluded." Goldenstar mewed, jumping down from her branch. The Clans continued their conversations. Jaggedpaw turned to Sandpaw and Applepaw.

"That was really cool." He mewed, both she-cats nodded in agreement.

"Gathering's are always fun, you get to meet a lot of different cats." Applepaw looked around. "If you get the time, you should try and

find Shadowpaw, Cinderpaw and Breezepaw from MoonClan, they're really nice. So are Mudpaw and Cloverpaw from AshClan."

"Thanks for telling us." Maplepaw purred. "We'll keep an eye out!"

Jaggedpaw and the others didn't have time to find the other apprentices after saying goodbye to Sandpaw and Applepaw as the gathering came to an end. Jaggedpaw was disappointed, but knew that there would be many more gatherings in the future.

Chapter 6

Jaggedpaw focused intently on his prey, a sparrow pecking the ground for worms, just a few mouselengths in front of him. He crept forward, keeping his paws silent. The bird had no idea that it was about to become fresh-kill. Taking a deep, silent breath, Jaggedpaw jumped forward, the bird began to fly away but it met Jaggedpaw's claws first.

He dragged the sparrow to the ground and killed it with a quick bite. Jaggedpaw looked at his prey proudly, he was proud at his bird catching skills. *Fawnsky will love this.* His mother's favorite prey was birds, she always picked them over anything else. He quickly buried his catch and looked around for more prey.

"Jaggedpaw!" Hearing his name, Jaggedpaw looked over his shoulder. He heard the rustling of brush as Hareclaw stepped into view.

"Is it time for me to come back already?" He looked up at the sky, he was supposed to hunt until sunhigh, it wasn't quite time.

"I'm sorry to cut your hunting short," Hareclaw apologized. "But Birdstar wants us for something."

"Alright." Jaggedpaw wouldn't argue, he unburied his sparrow and gathered the rest of his prey which was two squirrels along the way. He dropped his catch on the fresh-kill pile and followed his mentor to Birdstar's den. He watch as Hareclaw jumped up, climbing up to the leader's den. Jaggedpaw had never been inside Birdstar's den, but he had practiced a little bit of climbing.

He dug his claws into the bark and hauled himself up the tree and into the den where Birdstar and Jumpheart were sitting. "Greetings." Birdstar greeted both cats with a dip of her head.

Hareclaw dipped his head in return. "What did you need us for, Birdstar?"

"My patrol found a fox near the MoonClan border," Jumpheart replied, Jaggedpaw tensed at the mention of a fox. "It was weak so we chased it off but it ran into MoonClan territory, we want to warn Owlstar so some apprentice doesn't get attacked."

"And you want us to come?" Hareclaw questioned, sounding somewhat skeptical, and Jaggedpaw couldn't help but feel the same. Seemed like something Birdstar and Jumpheart could do on their own.

"I feel like seeing another Clan's camp could be a good learning experience for an apprentice." Birdstar replied, looking at Jaggedpaw with gentle eyes. "Out of all the apprentices we have I feel that Jaggedpaw will gain the most from it."

Jaggedpaw's pelt burned slightly. "Why me?"

"Because I saw your eagerness at the gathering." Birdstar purred. "You have an interest in the other Clans that isn't necessarily aggressive. You want to learn about them."

"I suppose." Jaggedpaw shuffled his paws, he supposed he *did* want to learn about the other Clans. It would be interesting to see another Clan's camp.

"Then we should set out, then." Birdstar stood up and the group of cats climbed out of the den. Jaggedpaw spotted Elmpaw and Maplepaw across the camp, looking at him curiously. As they passed them, Elmpaw ran up beside Jaggedpaw.

"Where are you going?" He questioned with curiosity burning in his amber eyes.

"MoonClan camp." Jaggedpaw replied. "Birdstar needs to talk to Owlstar."

"No fair." Elmpaw snorted.

"Elmpaw," Hareclaw spoke sternly. "Instead of complaining, why don't you take some prey to Hazelshine. Sagefeather said she's looking too thin."

"Yeah, yeah." Elmpaw rolled his eyes and flicked his tail. "You better tell me about it when you get back!"

"I will!" Jaggedpaw promised as he watched his friend bound towards the fresh-kill pile then the nursery. Hazelshine announced she was having kits about a moon ago, she was incredibly young but the Clan was happy. However, she hadn't told any cat who the father was.

Jaggedpaw stopped thinking about Hazelshine and focused on his excitement about going into another Clan's territory. *Birdstar thinks I'm mature enough to do enough, so I have to prove it.* He told himself, holding his head high and withholding his excitement from showing too much.

They crossed LichenClan's territory with ease, reaching the marshlands which Jaggedpaw didn't like. He didn't like the feeling of the wet grass between his toes. *Am I going to have to cross another river?* Jaggedpaw questioned, hoping he didn't have to get anything other than his paws wet.

They reached the MoonClan border where the river was quite thin. "We'll jump across here and wait for a patrol." Birdstar explained, taking a mighty leap over the river. She landed with ease and waited for her Clanmates to follow. *She's very agile for her age.* Jaggedpaw noticed, Birdstar was quite old but could still manage a jump like that, it was impressive.

Jaggedpaw jumped across the river, his paws landing gently on the other side. *That's better than swimming.* He thought, looking at the flowing river with annoyance. He stood beside Hareclaw while they waited for a MoonClan patrol to show up.

It wasn't long before they heard voices across the moor. Jaggedpaw narrowed his eyes and saw a group of cats coming up to them. At the front was Cloudwind, the MoonClan deputy. Behind her was a pure white she-cat, a gray tabby she-cat and a pale ginger she-cat. Jaggedpaw noticed the ginger she-cat say something to Cloudwind.

When the patrol was close enough, Birdstar stepped forward to face them. "Greetings." She dipped her head respectfully.

"Hello, Birdstar." Cloudwind eyed the group of LichenClan cats suspiciously. "Why are you on MoonClan territory." She seemed hostile, but Jaggedpaw couldn't blame her.

"I would like to speak with Owlstar if possible." Birdstar's tone was very polite. "It's urgent and involves the safety of MoonClan cats."

Cloudwind looked uneasy but nodded. "Very well, Birdstar. Follow us." She looked at the patrol one last time before turning her back and heading towards what Jaggedpaw assumed was MoonClan camp.

As they crossed the moor, Jaggedpaw couldn't help but feel uncomfortably exposed. There were hardly any trees around here, it was just hilly land. He already missed the thick forests of his own territory. *How can MoonClan cats live like this?*

In the distance, Jaggedpaw spotted a circle of trees in a hollow. There were several cats and what looked liked burrows in the hollow. *That must be the camp.* Jaggedpaw realized. *Do they really sleep in burrows like that?* He shuddered slightly.

When they reached the camp, Jaggedpaw could instantly feel suspicious glares burning into his pelt. He held his head high and refused to let it bother him.

"Why is LichenClan here?" Jaggedpaw turned his head to see a black apprentice looking up at an older cat, presumably his mentor.

"Don't be afraid." Cloudwind called out to her Clanmates. "Birdstar and her followers come in peace, she just wants to speak with Owlstar."

"Why do they want to speak with him?" A large gray tom called from across the camp. "What is so important that it couldn't wait for the gathering?"

"Birdstar claims it's urgent and she has never given us any reason to be wary." Cloudwind's voice was calm as she spoke to her warriors. "If there's an issue I'm sure Owlstar will deal with it." She led Birdstar towards a large den, which Jaggedpaw guessed was

Owlstar's den. "He's in here." Cloudwind motioned with her head. "I'll come with you."

"Jumpheart and Hareclaw, you can come with me." Birdstar spoke, then turned her gaze to Jaggedpaw. "Have Jaggedpaw wait out here, we won't be long." Jaggedpaw was suddenly nervous, why did he have to wait outside? He looked at Hareclaw who gave him a reassuring nod. *I'll be okay.* Jaggedpaw took a deep breath and sat down, looking at the leader's den as his Clanmates vanished inside.

He could feel the glares of MoonClan burning into him, but he ignored them and stayed focused. Eventually, the cats of MoonClan continued their daily lives. Beside Jaggedpaw, he heard pawsteps. He turned his head to see a black kit, not much younger than Jaggedpaw. He has black with white ears and a single white paw. His icy blue eyes were looking at Jaggedpaw with intense curiosity.

"Need something?" Jaggedpaw questioned the kit.

"Why are you in my camp?" The kit questioned, puffing out his chest and trying to make himself look bigger.

This kit is trying to brave. Jaggedpaw thought humorously. "My leader needs to talk to your leader. Your deputy explained that pretty well I thought." The kit wrinkled his nose in frustration.

"Well you're just an apprentice, why did you have to come?" The kit demanded, Jaggedpaw didn't feel much threat from this kit, he was just curious.

"Because Hareclaw is my mentor." He replied. "You're just a kit, why are you talking to an apprentice from another Clan?" The kit's fur puffed out in annoyance.

"You're in my camp, I should be able to talk to whoever I want." He stuck his nose in the air. "Plus," He added with a slight hiss. "You're not that much older than me."

Jaggedpaw flicked his tail. "When do you become an apprentice?" He questioned, with genuine curiosity.

"In a few days." The kit held his head high and proud. *I remember*

feeling that way. Jaggedpaw thought, starting to admire this kit.

"You're right," Jaggedpaw cast a glance towards the leader's den, they must still be talking. "You're not that much younger than me, I've only been an apprentice for a little over a moon." The kit snorted and looked back at a den that Jaggedpaw guessed was the nursery. "What's your name?" He asked.

The kit turned back to Jaggedpaw. "My name is Crowkit."

"Well, Crowkit." Jaggedpaw looked at Crowkit with interest, he wasn't too bad. "I looked forward to seeing you as Crowpaw at the next gathering." Crowkit looked slightly confused, his tail twitching.

"Crowkit!" Jaggedpaw heard a sharp mew coming from the nursery, he saw a black she-cat. She looked exhausted, her pelt was poorly maintained and her eyes dull. "Don't you have better things to do than annoy LichenClan apprentices?" *He wasn't annoying me.* Jaggedpaw thought, then looked at Crowkit. He had flattened his ears and was now staring at his paws.

"Is that an elder?" Jaggedpaw questioned, she didn't look like a healthy warrior.

"No," Crowkit grumbled. "That's my mother." He turned away from Jaggedpaw, dragging his tail behind him.

"Yikes." Jaggedpaw felt awkward, why was his mother like that? How old was she? "I'm sorry, then." Jaggedpaw apologized, watching the kit drag himself back to the nursery. "It was nice to meet you Crowkit!" Jaggedpaw called, but Crowkit didn't look back. *Poor Crowkit.* He thought. *I'd hate to have a mother like that, she seems rude.*

Jaggedpaw let out a quiet sigh, from the corner of his eye he could see a black tom with white ears looking at the nursery sadly. He looked like he could be Crowkit's father, hopefully he was nicer than his mother.

"Thank you for telling us, Birdstar." Jaggedpaw recognized the voice of Owlstar as he and the others stepped out of the den. "We'll

certainly keep an eye out and hopefully chase it out."

"No problem." Birdstar dipped her head. "No cat should be at risk from a fox attack."

"I agree." Owlstar nodded. "Well, I will have Cloudwind escort you to the border. Have safe travels and may StarClan light your path."

"Yours as well." Birdstar purred. "Thank you for your hospitality." As Cloudwind led them away, Jaggedpaw cast one final glance at the nursery, Crowkit was staying inside. *I hope I see him at the gathering. He was nice.*

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When Jaggedpaw and his travel mates reached the camp they found it in a state of panic. Stormpaw was sprinting from the medicine cat to the nursery, Patchfoot, Cedarcloud and Vinetail were all pacing nervously and the rest of the camp looked incredibly uneasy.

"What's going on here?" Birdstar announced when she stepped into camp, her eyes full of concern for her Clan.

"Hazelshine started kitting." Patchfoot reported, his voice in a panic.

"She's barely been in the nursery for a moon!" Jumpheart mewed in shock.

"There's no need to panic." Birdstar approached Hazelshine's frantic family. "She is in the paws of our very capable medicine cats, she will do just fine. She's a very strong she-cat." Her voice was incredibly reassuring, it even calmed down Patchfoot, Cedarcloud and Vinetail slightly.

"Shouldn't the father be acting up? Or is he in the nursery?" Jaggedpaw's ears twitched as he heard conversations behind him. He turned his head to see Breezefall and Ashstream talking.

"She never told us who the father is." Rowanfang replied.

"And that is completely her right." Jaggedpaw was somewhat surprised at the sudden appearance of Mosswing who stood a few

taillengths away. "A queen is never required to tell the Clan who the father of her kits is. Perhaps the father doesn't want or isn't ready for kits."

Rowanfang narrowed his amber eyes and looked away from Mosswing, Ashstream seemed incredibly uncomfortable between the two ex-mates. Pretty much the entire Clan knew that Rowanfang and Mosswing were no longer together.

Mosswing let out a slight snort. "Hazelshine will be a wonderful mother, she's young but I believe she's ready."

Hazelshine's kitting went well into the night, with the entire Clan concerned for her and the future kit's safety. Jaggedpaw sat with Elmpaw and Maplepaw as they waited for the kits to arrive. At moonhigh, Jaggedpaw knew they should be sleeping but he was worried for his Clanmate.

After what seemed like ages, Sagefeather and Stormpaw stepped out of the nursery, all eyes went to her. Patchfoot and Cedarcloud ran to the medicine cats. "What's the news? Is she okay? Are the kits okay?"

"Hazelshine is just fine and so are her two daughters." Sagefeather purred. "They're weak from being born so early, but with proper care they will grow up to be healthy cats." Jaggedpaw felt the entire Clan sigh with relief. "Before you go visit them I'd recomend you give them some rest for the night, they've had an eventful day."

Cedarcloud and Patchfoot didn't argue, they just touched noses and muttered words of love and joy about their new kin. Jaggedpaw felt better about sleeping now, he was excited to meet LichenClan's two newest members!

Chapter 7

LichenClan were the first to arrive at the gathering hollow, but SunClan weren't far behind. Birdstar called to Foxstar and they exchanged pleasantries. Jaggedpaw was just as excited for this gathering as he was his first, he hoped to see Crowkit here. Wondering if the MoonClan cat would be an apprentice by now.

It wasn't long before Jaggedpaw spotted MoonClan coming over the ridge, his eyes scanned for Crowkit. He couldn't find him until the cats started to disperse, then he spotted him by his white ears. "Come with me." Jaggedpaw said to Elmpaw and Maplepaw. "I want to introduce you to someone."

Elmpaw and Maplepaw seemed confused but followed anyway. They approached Crowkit, or Jaggedpaw guess it was Crowpaw now, who seemed to be slightly nervous. "You're an apprentice now." He spoke to the apprentice. Crowpaw jumped, turning in alarm and looking at Jaggedpaw, Elmpaw and Maplepaw. "Glad to see you made it." Jaggedpaw mewed.

"Yeah." Crowpaw's voice trailed off, he looked incredibly uncomfortable. *What happened to the bold kit I met?* Jaggedpaw wondered, he decided to introduce his friends.

"This is my sister Maplepaw and this is my best friend Elmpaw." He motioned to the other two apprentices, then turned to them. "This is Crowpaw of MoonClan, I met him when I went with Hareclaw to MoonClan camp."

"It's nice to meet you, Crowpaw." Maplepaw purred, being her usual kind self. Elmpaw just nodded. *What's his problem?* Jaggedpaw would ask later. "Is this your first gathering?" She questioned.

Crowpaw nodded. "I haven't been an apprentice for very long. Is it your first gathering?" He looked over the three apprentices, he seemed to be calming down.

Elmpaw finally replied. "No. Our second, we've been apprentices for almost two moons." Crowpaw tilted his head slightly.

"You all became apprentices together?" Crowpaw seemed confused.

"Our mother's are really close friends and had kits within days of each other." Jaggedpaw explained, wondering if he should mention Robinkit. He decided against it, Crowpaw didn't need to know about that. Crowpaw nodded and his blue eyes became distant, he was clearing thinking about something.

"AshClan has arrived!" A gray SunClan tom called, getting the rest of the Clan's attention. Jaggedpaw watched Goldenstar and her Clan walked into the gathering hollow. Crowpaw watched the Clan, he clearly didn't know the names of Goldenstar or Ivyheart.

"That's Goldenstar and Ivyheart of AshClan. The brown tabby tom near them is the medicine cat apprentice, Eagleclaw." He looked for the medicine cat Featherstorm but only saw a small, silver tabby she-cat with Eagleclaw. "Though, I'm pretty sure Featherstorm is their medicine cat but I don't see her."

"Now that AshClan is here." Foxstar called. "We should begin." The leader's took their place and the cats of the Clans sat down. Jaggedpaw looked at Crowpaw who sat down with them, but looked around, he appeared to be looking for someone.

"Since AshClan is late," Owlstar spoke, looking at Goldenstar. "I suppose they should go first." Goldenstar nodded and stood up, her green eyes shining.

"AshClan has very sad news to announce. Our beloved medicine cat Featherstorm has passed away due to her age. She served AshClan for countless seasons and will be remembered forever." There was a moment of silence as the Clans honored the lost medicine cat. "However, we proudly welcome three new apprentices, one of which who has become Eagleclaw's apprentice. Please welcome Riverpaw, Echopaw and Moonpaw!" The Clans' mood lifted and there were warm purrs. "Greenleaf is drawing to a close, but AshClan is still thriving."

"I'm glad to hear that," Foxstar dipped his head to the AshClan leader. "If you're finished I will go next." Goldenstar sat down and Foxstar stood up. "SunClan doesn't have much news, one of our kits was injured a while ago but thanks to our wonderful medicine cats she is making a full recovery. Prey is running well and our warriors are strong and happy." Foxstar sat down and nodded to Owlstar who stood up next.

"MoonClan doesn't have much to announce, but we do welcome one new apprentice. Please give a warm welcome to, Crowpaw!" The cats of the Clans cheered for the new apprentice, Jaggedpaw looked at Crowpaw who seemed to be incredibly uncomfortable. "Even as greenleaf draws to a close, the rivers are full and the rabbits are plentiful." After Owlstar sat down, Birdstar stood, looking over the Clans.

"LichenClan is joyful to announce that Hazelshine has given birth to two healthy she-cats. Other than that, we don't have much to announce, prey is running very well."

"I suppose this gathering is at a conclusion." Goldenstar mewed. "I see no reason to rush home on this beautiful night, we should stay and enjoy the truce." The four leaders agreed and jumped down from their trees.

Jaggedpaw stood up and looked at Crowpaw, he looked slightly more relaxed, but still on edge. "Do you have any siblings?" Maplepaw questioned, looking around the group of cats before resting her green gaze back on Crowpaw. The black apprentice tensed at her questioned, after a moment of hesitation he finally replied.

"No, it's just me." His voice was dry, Crowpaw was clearly upset about something.

"That's too bad." Jaggedpaw spoke up. "But I'm sure you have friends in your Clan?" He tilted his head, hopefully changing the subject would help him.

"Sort of." He mewed awkwardly. "There's two kits still in the nursery, they'll be apprentices soon and we're pretty close."

"That's great." Maplepaw purred. "How do you like being an apprentice so far? What's the best thing you've learned?"

At that question, Crowpaw's spirit seemed lifted slightly. "Swimming." He replied. Jaggedpaw and Elmpaw shared the same glance, forgetting for a moment that MoonClan cats actually enjoy swimming.

"You *enjoy* swimming?" Elmpaw questioned in disbelief. "We have to cross a river to get here but I hate getting my pelt wet." Jaggedpaw nodded along.

Crowpaw let out a *mrrow* of laughter. "Well, MoonClan cats love the water, with a few exceptions. My father is not a fan of swimming."

"I don't blame him." Elmpaw snorted. "I don't see how some LichenClan cats even enjoy getting their paws wet. We have such thick fur." His ears twitched.

"You're just heavier than most." Maplepaw shoved Elmpaw playfully and he flattened his ears. Jaggedpaw laughed at the two then turned to Crowpaw, the gathering would be ending soon.

"Well, it was nice talking to you Crowpaw. We should meet up with our mentors before the gathering ends, I'll see you at the next gathering." Jaggedpaw dipped his head to Crowpaw who did the same in return. Both Elmpaw and Maplepaw bid farewell and the three apprentices turned away from Crowpaw.

"He was nice." Maplepaw said in a light tone. "Seemed a bit uncomfortable though."

"Probably just shy." Elmpaw noted. "He was by himself, gatherings can be intimidating."

"You should've seen him when I was in MoonClan camp." Jaggedpaw mewed, recalling meeting Crowpaw for the first time. "He marched right up to me."

"That was also in his own camp." Maplepaw pointed out. "He was surrounded by cats he knew, a gathering is full of cats you don't know."

"That's true." Jaggedpaw agreed with his sister, but he also couldn't help but feel that something was wrong Crowpaw. He remembered how harsh his mother seemed, maybe she had something to do with it. He shook his head. *I shouldn't fret over Crowpaw so much, I'm sure he was just being shy.*

As the gathering came to a close, Jaggedpaw, Elmpaw and Maplepaw found their mentors before returning home.

Chapter 8

"You need to put all of your weight into your front paws, Jaggedpaw." Hareclaw instructed. "It will keep you balanced."

Jaggedpaw nodded and placed his front paws on the ground, putting all of his weight into them as he kicked his legs backwards. He felt like a fool, but Hareclaw insisted that it would be a good technique to use in battle.

"When your opponent is chasing you, you can kick out and catch them off guard. Just remember to judge their distance carefully or you could completely miss." Hareclaw looked at Jaggedpaw's form carefully.

"Now you try, Maplepaw." Cedarcloud said from where she was sitting with Rowanfang and Ashstream. Jaggedpaw watched as his sister attempted the same move Jaggedpaw, Fieldpaw and Gingerpaw had done before. She placed her paws on the ground and kicked backwards, it seemed to come to her naturally. "Very good." Cedarcloud praised."

"This next technique," Ashstream said, stepping forward with Rowanfang. "Is somewhat more advanced and can be difficult to master." She looked at the four apprentices. "Gingerpaw and Fieldpaw have practiced this before." She faced Rowanfang in the center of the training area.

"What you want to do," Rowanfang said, "Is turn on your side and get under your opponent's belly, raking at their belly with your claws. Afterwards you want to swiftly turn back onto all fours out from under your opponent. We will demonstrate."

Jaggedpaw sat down, watching the two warriors. Ashstream lept towards Rowanfang, dropping to her side and quickly sliding under him. He tried to jump away but with both paws, Ashstream fake-clawed his belly and then was back on her paws in an instant. "You have to be incredibly quick." Ashstream mewed, turning her gaze

back on the apprentices. "If you're swift and accurate you can leave your enemy unable to fight."

"Gingerpaw with Fieldpaw and Maplepaw with Jaggedpaw. Take turns trying to rake each other's bellies." Hareclaw instructed. Jaggedpaw stepped into the training area, facing his sister. He knew that Maplepaw was quick and agile, he would have to do his best to try and stop her. "Now!"

Maplepaw moved like lightly, going to her side and before Jaggedpaw knew it, she was under him. He tried his best to jump back but he felt her paws jabbing into his belly, causing him to nearly fall backwards. Maplepaw was back on her paws before Jaggedpaw regained his balance, holding her high.

"You're a natural, Maplepaw." Cedarcloud called. "Your turn Jaggedpaw." Jaggedpaw didn't allow Maplepaw to react, he had to take her off guard if he wanted to be as good as her. He turned to his side, soon facing his sister's white belly fur. With sheathed claws, Jaggedpaw dragged his paws across her belly. Maplepaw jumped upwards, allowing Jaggedpaw to get out. However, as he attempted to stand back up, he tripped over his paws and landed on his shoulder.

"Not bad, Jaggedpaw." Hareclaw mewed. "You need to be careful when getting up, you're a but clumsy."

With his pelt burning with embarrassment, he stood up and faced Maplepaw once more. "Try it again." She encouraged. "You did really good last time." Jaggedpaw felt his embarrassment fade. *Mistakes are part of training.* He reminded himself. *I can do this.*

He attacked once more, but this time Maplepaw was prepared for him. Despite this, Jaggedpaw was quick enough to slip under Maplepaw once more, raking her belly and getting back out. Other than a small stumble it was nearly perfect.

"Good job, Jaggedpaw." Hareclaw praised. "Keep trying it, both of you." The four apprentices continued their training for quite a while until their mentors called it a day. Jaggedpaw's belly felt bruised from how hard Maplepaw had been hitting it, he was sure her belly

felt the same way.

As they followed their mentors back to camp, Jaggedpaw walked beside his sister, despite all their training she had a bright energy in her eyes. "You did good today." She purred.

"So did you." Jaggedpaw nudged Maplepaw. "When you get in a fight you'll be a force to be feared."

Maplepaw chuckled. "Cedarcloud is a wonderful mentor." She purred. "She trains me so well."

"Hareclaw is a great mentor as well. He's very stern and serious, he pushes me but it helps." Jaggedpaw explained, looking at his mentor who was having a conversation with Ashstream. Jaggedpaw couldn't help but noticed Rowanfang was slightly detached from the group, not walking near Fieldpaw or any of the other mentors.

What's his problem? Jaggedpaw thought somewhat bitterly. He shook his head, not wanting to waste his time worrying about what was wrong with Rowanfang, he was rude and treated Mosswing like crowfood.

Once they reached camp, Hareclaw went directly to Amberflame, the two touched noses and shared very caring gazes. Hareclaw had grown really close to Amberflame, Jaggedpaw wouldn't be surprised if Amberflame was expecting kits soon.

Jaggedpaw looked at the nursery, he could hear the squeaking mews of Hazelshine's two kits which she named Applekit and Cherrykit. They were a moon old and growing quickly, with the care of Sagefeather and Stormpaw they were just as strong as any other kits, despite the fact they were born a moon early.

Jaggedpaw felt good, knowing that LichenClan was thriving, Applekit and Cherrykit wouldn't be apprentices for quite some time but having kits around would be pleasant.

"Wanna get some fresh-kill?" Maplepaw asked, pulling Jaggedpaw's attention from the nursery. Jaggedpaw nodded, he hadn't eaten since he woke up and it would great to share some fresh kill with

his sister.

"Yeah," Jaggedpaw nodded. "Go get us some prey and meet me by the apprentice den." Maplepaw happily trotted over to the fresh-kill pile while Jaggedpaw went to the apprentice den. Daisypaw and Sparrowpaw were sharing their own fresh-kill near the den.

"Have either of you seen Elmpaw?" He questioned.

Daisypaw shared a look with her brother and thought for a moment. "I'm pretty sure he's on patrol right now."

"Alright, thank you." Jaggedpaw dipped his head and sat down as Maplepaw approached Jaggedpaw with a large squirrel in her jaws. She set it down and took a bite, Jaggedpaw did the same.

The day was slowly coming to a close and LichenClan cats were settling down. Birdstar was sharing prey with Rockflower and Dustfang outside the elder's den, Sagefeather was carrying some leaves to the nursery and the warriors were sharing tongues throughout the camp. *The patrol she be back here soon.* Jaggedpaw thought, wondered what was taking them so long.

Jaggedpaw and Maplepaw finished their prey, and the patrol still hadn't showed up. He was starting to feel nervous and some of the Clan appeared to be as well. Just as cats were really starting to worry, the patrol returned. The patrol consisted of Jumpheart, Skytail, Elmpaw, Krestleflame, Patchfoot and Badgerpaw. However, the patrol looked exhausted. Their pelts were laced with wounds and matted with dried blood. Badgerpaw had a deep looking wound on his shoulder that bled slowly down his leg. Skytail had claw marks across his cheek and Elmpaw had wounds on both of his shoulders, though not as bad as Badgerpaw's.

There was something else about Elmpaw though, he had blood splattered across his face and chest and his amber eyes were hollow. He stared at his paws and dragged his paws as he walked behind Skytail.

"What in the name of StarClan happened?" Birdstar was on her paws and ran to the patrol. "Did you get into a fight?"

"Ashbird accused us of stealing prey." Jumpheart explained, bleeding from a wound under his eye. "She challenged us and I couldn't back down."

"Why did she think we were stealing prey?" Birdstar demanded.

"She said they caught LichenClan scent on their side of the border. I assured her that no LichenClan cat had been crossing the border, she didn't believe us and as I said, challenged us."

Birdstar let out a heavy sigh. "Jumpheart, that is no excuse to attack another patrol!" Jumpheart winced slightly. "I'll discuss this with you later, for now you all need your wounds treated. Is there anyone seriously injured?"

"No, but." Jumpheart sighed and cast a glance over his shoulder, he seemed to be looking at Elmpaw. "There was a casualty." Birdstar tensed. "The MoonClan warrior, Blacksky died."

"Who killed him?" Birdstar's voice shook, Jaggedpaw was on edge.

"Elmpaw."

The Clan went silent, Jaggedpaw felt his blood go cold as he looked at Elmpaw, his friend's ears were flattened and he avoided all gazes.

"Elmpaw," Birdstar stepped forward, her voice silent. "Is this true?"

"It is." Elmpaw muttered, he looked up at his leader, panic flashing in his eyes. "I didn't mean to do it! I just lashed out and I--" He lowered himself to the floor. "I'm so sorry, Birdstar, I never wanted this to happen."

Birdstar closed her eyes, taking a deep breath. "Elmpaw, it's okay. However, MoonClan will not see it that way." Elmpaw looked up at Birdstar, trembling slightly. "I'm sorry Elmpaw but I must take action. I no longer want you on border patrols and you won't be attending any gatherings for the foreseeable future."

Elmpaw's eyes went wide and his jaw dropped, his ears flattened. "Birdstar I--"

"Don't argue with me, Elmpaw." Birdstar silenced the apprentice. "It has to be this way. You killed an innocent cat, we fight against other cats but we should never take their lives." Elmpaw ducked his head. "The warrior code is directly against killing warriors. MoonClan cats *have* to know that LichenClan cats honor the warrior code and that we punish those who break it." Birdstar looked to the cats of LichenClan. "On that note, I want to know who crossed the border. There won't be any harsh punishments, but I need to know."

The Clan was silent, that is, until Elmpaw spoke up. "That--that was me too." He mumbled.

Birdstar looked down at the trembling apprentice, the old leader let out an exhausted sigh. "Elmpaw..." Her voice trailed off. "Why did you cross the border?"

"I was hunting when my prey jumped across the river. I didn't want to let it go so..." Elmpaw looked around, meeting Jaggedpaw's gaze for just a moment. *Oh Elmpaw...* "I didn't catch it on the other side, I just chased it back over to our territory so I could catch it there."

"Elmpaw." Birdstar didn't sound angry, she just sounded like a disappointed mother. "I know it's hard to give up prey and I'm glad you didn't catch it on their territory but you shouldn't have crossed the border, this whole thing could've been avoided."

"I'm sorry." Elmpaw flattened himself against the floor. "I never meant for any of this to happen."

"Go to Sagefeather, Elmpaw. Your punishment stills stands, go have your wounds treated." She looked at the rest of the patrol. "That goes for all of you."

"My wounds aren't too bad, Birdstar." Jumpheart remaind in place as the others went towards the medicine cat den. "I want to apologize for starting the fight, I just couldn't stand by and let Ashbird insult my Clan."

"You're no better than an apprentice if you think that way, Jumpheart." Birdstar scolded. "A cat of ours crossed the border and you attacked another Clan for accusing of something we actually

did." Jaggedpaw could tell that Birdstar was getting upset.

"But I didn't know--"

"*Silence!"* Jaggedpaw nearly jumped back, he had never seen Birdstar so upset, she was normally calm and relaxed just as she was with Elmpaw. Jumpheart flattened his ears. "Even if we hadn't crossed the border then you should've came and spoken to me about it or tried and reason with Ashbird." Birdstar took a deep breath, calming herself. "Jumpheart, come speak with me in my den."

Jaggedpaw watched as Birdstar led the deputy to her den, he wondered badly Jumpheart would be punished. Jaggedpaw then turned his gaze back to the medicine cat den where Elmpaw had gone. He was now outside speaking with Mosswing, his head was low and her eyes were sad.

Jaggedpaw sighed and looked at Maplepaw. "Think he'll be okay?"

Maplepaw nodded. "Elmpaw made a mistake and he has to live with that. We can try and support him but what he did was wrong."

"I know." Jaggedpaw sighed, staring at his paws. "But he's my friend and I know he didn't mean to do it. I worry about him."

"So do I, Jaggedpaw." Maplepaw brushed up against Jaggedpaw. "We can help him the best we can, but for now we have to let him think about what he's done." Jaggedpaw knew his sister was right, but he only hoped that Elmpaw would learn from his grave mistake.

Chapter 9

This gathering didn't feel right without Elmpaw. Jaggedpaw walked beside Maplepaw as they neared the hollow, the entirety of LichenClan was dreading this gathering. Owlstar would announce the death of their warrior caused by a LichenClan apprentice. It had been about a half-moon since Elmpaw killed Blacksky and his punishment showed no signs of being lifted.

The moment LichenClan stepped into the hollow, Jaggedpaw could feel the hate-filled glares of MoonClan. Jaggedpaw looked around for Crowpaw, Elmpaw had told him that Blacksky was Crowpaw's father and that he had died in front of him. *I'm a monster, Jaggedpaw! I killed Crowpaw's father in front of him! He'll hate me forever.* Elmpaw's panicked words rang in his ears.

It'll be okay, Elmpaw. Jaggedpaw said in his head, wishing it to be true. LichenClan kept their distance from MoonClan, trying to ignore their glares. SunClan and AshClan cats muttered to themselves, wondering what going on between the other two Clans.

Birdstar climbed her tree and looked over the Clans. As Jaggedpaw expected, Owlstar spoke first. "I'd like to start this gathering off." His voice was on edge and quite upset.

"Very well, Owlstar." Goldenstar mewed, sharing a confused glanced with Foxstar.

"MoonClan suffered an avoidable tragedy this moon. Our warrior Blacksky was killed after LichenClan warriors attacked us. They crossed the border, denied it and then attacked us, killing one of our warriors." The Clans let out gasps of shock.

"I would like to explain the actions of my warriors." Birdstar stood up, Owlstar glared intensely at the LichenClan leader. "It is true that one of our cats killed Blacksky and for that I am deeply sorry. His death never should've happened and I assure you that the cat guilty has been punished as well as the warriors who led the attack

against your Clan."

"Blacksky was an honored warrior." Owlstar snarled. "You should be grateful that MoonClan hasn't retaliated!"

"No more blood needs to be shed, not from your Clan or my Clan. Let your warrior rest in peace, Owlstar." Birdstar was keeping her gaze steady. Jaggedpaw could tell all of MoonClan were getting agitated.

"Don't tell me how to lead!" Owlstar spat, unsheathed his claws and digging them into the branch he was standing on.

"I won't break this truce." Birdstar stared down the MoonClan leader. "And neither should you. I suggest you carry on with the rest of your news and we can go our separate ways."

Both Goldenstar and Foxstar looked incredibly uncomfortable, but Owlstar let out a deep breath and sheathed his claws. "Before the death of Blacksky, we announced two new apprentices. Please welcome Frostpaw and Icepaw." MoonClan cheered, and there were muffled cheers from the other Clans but the argument between Owlstar and Birdstar had clearly made the other Clans uncomfortable.

The gathering continued, but when it ended neither LichenClan nor MoonClan remained, Birdstar and Owlstar led their respective Clans home. Jaggedpaw hung back with Maplepaw, seeing no sign of Crowpaw. He just sighed and went back home, wishing this whole thing would blow over. Not only for Elmpaw's sake, but for the sake of all of MoonClan.

Life in LichenClan camp was slowly getting better, most cats had moved on from the death of Blacksky. Jaggedpaw had been right in assuming that Amberflame would be expecting Hareclaw's kits as she had move into the nursery with Hazelshine just a few days ago. Jaggedpaw was glad that new kits would be born soon, he hoped it would bring joy to the Clan and lighten their spirits.

It was the day after the gathering and Elmpaw was mostly just moping around camp, doing duties such as treating the elder's ticks

or giving moss to the nursery. He would go hunting and rarely do battle training but was still banned from border patrols. He wished he could help Elmpaw, but Jaggedpaw knew there was nothing he could do for the time being.

Jaggedpaw sat outside the apprentice den, Maplepaw was out hunting but Jaggedpaw had nothing to do for the time being. Hareclaw was really busy making sure Amberflame was comfortable, he was worried that Amberflame would have a difficult kitting like Hazelshine did. Jaggedpaw hoped that wasn't the case and Sagefeather assured the Clan that Amberflame would be just fine.

Jaggedpaw's ears twitched as he heard hushed mews coming from two different cats. He looked around, eventually spotting Rowanfang and Mosswing next to each other, Mosswing's ears were flattened and Rowanfang had his teeth bared. Jaggedpaw edged closer, trying to hear what the two were saying.

"I don't see why you're acting this way." Mosswing snarled. "Maybe if you had been around he wouldn't have done something like this."

"Blacksky's death has nothing to do with me, I told you I wanted nothing to do with these kits, Mosswing." Rowanfang spat her name. "I knew from the day these kits were born that bad things would happen. Now our daughter is dead and our son is a murderer."

"Elmpaw is not a murderer!" Mosswing's voice raised above a whisper to a shout, Jaggedpaw tensed as the Clan turned to look. Elmpaw, who was leaving the elder's den's ears perked, his amber gaze trembling.

"He killed an innocent cat." Rowanfang lashed his tail. "Sounds like a murderer to me." Rowanfang stepped past Mosswing and turned on Elmpaw who tucked his tail between his legs. Jaggedpaw stood up in alarm. "Because of your actions, Elmpaw, everyone other Clan will think negatively of not only the whole Clan but myself as well. They will think my blood produces murderers!"

"This is *not about you!*" Rowanfang whirled around to face Mosswing

whose fur was on edge, her claws digging into the earth under her paws. "Stop yelling at him! Step down, Rowanfang!"

"He deserves it!" Rowanfang's eyes burned with anger.

"Leave my son alone!" Mosswing and Rowanfang were in each other's faces now, barely a whisker apart.

"He's my son--"

"No he's not!" The entire Clan was looking now, in concern and fear. Elmpaw sat behind his parents looking horrified. Jaggedpaw wanted to run out and comfort his friend. *He doesn't deserve this.* "I told you when Robinkit died that you didn't have any kits! You didn't want any so you don't have any!" Rowanfang stepped back, flattening his ears and snarling. "You blamed me for Robinkit's death and told me that you never wanted kits, so I told *you* that they weren't your kits anymore."

Mosswing looked around, taking note that each of her Clanmates were watching this fight. "I love Elmpaw, he is my son and I love him more than anything in this entire forest! He made a mistake but I don't love him any less, you don't deserve a son like him!"

Suddenly, Elmpaw dashed past his father and to his mother's side, pressing against her. Mosswing pulled her son closed and whispered something that Jaggedpaw couldn't hear. Movement caught Jaggedpaw's eyes as Fawnsky had stood up and was now going to Mosswing's side as well. Jaggedpaw looked at Maplepaw who met his gaze, from the look in her eyes he could tell they had the same thought. Both siblings stood beside Elmpaw and his mother.

"I think you should leave them alone." A voice behind Jaggedpaw nearly made him jump, but he turned to see Sunstorm standing close by. Rowanfang hissed and turned away, lashing his tail as he vanished into the warrior's den, cursing under his breath.

"I'm sorry about that." Mosswing spoke up to the rest of the Clan. "The rest of you shouldn't of had to deal with it."

"Don't worry about it," Fawnsky nuzzled her friend. "You don't need

Rowanfang, I just wished I would've known about what was going on between you two. But we're all here for both of you."

Jaggedpaw nudged Elmpaw, getting his attention. "I'm sorry about your father." Jaggedpaw mewed.

Elmpaw let out a saddened sigh, shrugging his shoulders. "It's fine, Jaggedpaw. I've known for a long time that he doesn't like me and it's fine. I guess it didn't make it any better after I killed Blacksky." Elmpaw looked up towards the sky. "I wish I didn't, maybe this is my punishment for it, but." Elmpaw looked at Jaggedpaw, his amber eyes full of certainty, something Jaggedpaw hadn't seen for a long time. "But from now on, I'm to be a better warrior, a warrior that LichenClan can be proud of."

Chapter 10

Jaggedpaw washed his fur after finishing his prey. He waited patiently for Hareclaw and Cedarcloud to come get both him and Maplepaw for tree climbing lessons. He was currently visiting with Amberflame as usual. Cherrykit and Applekit who were now nearly two moons old, were playing outside with a fallen leaf. Greenleaf had come to an end, the leaves were changing and falling to the forest floor. Soon leaf-bare would be here, Jaggedpaw only hoped the Clan's would be prepared for the cold season.

It had been half a moon since the big fight between Rowanfang and Mosswing and things were finally seeming to fall back into a sense of normalcy. Elmpaw was still under punishment but worked hard without complaining and did his duties thoroughly. Jaggedpaw was proud of him, he really stuck to his word about being the best warrior he could be.

"Jaggedpaw!" Hareclaw called as he left the nursery. "Are you ready to go? Maplepaw and Cedarcloud will meet us out there along with Featherheart, Sunstorm, Sparrowpaw and Daisypaw." Jaggedpaw perked up at the thought of training with his father, he always enjoyed that. Sparrowpaw and Daisypaw would be warriors soon. Not long after the fight, Stormsong was given her full medicine cat name and Badgerstrike had been given his warrior name a few days ago. *Soon I'll be a warrior.* Jaggedpaw thought with joy, he couldn't wait to earn his warrior name.

Jaggedpaw and Hareclaw hurried into the forest, presumably to the highest trees in the territory where most apprentices learned to climb. It wasn't long before Jaggedpaw saw a group of cats standing at the base of the tree, looking up with interest and excitement.

"Welcome!" Sunstorm called cheerfully from where he stood, amber eyes sparkling. The rest of the apprentices looked towards Hareclaw's and Jaggedpaw's direction. "Hope you're ready for some climbing."

"Well I've never been the best at it," Jaggedpaw mewed with a half-chuckle, looking up at the top of the tree. "But I can always learn."

"That's the spirit, Jaggedpaw." Featherheart purred, nudging Sparrowpaw who looked like he was gonna be sick. "We are LichenClan cats, we're natural climbers."

"Daisypaw, you're a natural climber, why don't you start us off?"

"With pleasure." Daisypaw flicked her tail, unsheathed her claws and jumped onto the base of the tree. Using claws and her weight, Daisypaw pulled herself up to the closest branch, sitting on it proudly. "See." She called down to her brother. "It's a super easy." The pale gray she-cat turned and climbed even higher.

"Alright, who's next?" Sunstorm faced the apprentices, his gaze resting on Maplepaw. "How about you, Maplepaw?"

"Sure." She perked her head up and faced the tree. Jaggedpaw watched as his sister began to scale the tree.

"Good work, Maplepaw!" Daisypaw called from the upper branches of the tree. With a small amount of struggle, Maplepaw soon reached one of the branches.

"That wasn't so bad." Maplepaw chuckled, and dared to climb higher. She reached a rather thick branch and placed her paws firmly on it, maintaining her balance. She was so high, Jaggedpaw and the others had to squint when looking up at her.

"You two should get up here!" Maplepaw laughed, walking along her branch. Jaggedpaw watched as the branch trembled under her weight, sending fear into his heart.

"Maplepaw! Are you okay?" Jaggedpaw called.

"Uh, yeah." Maplepaw's voice shook slightly. "I don't know how stable this branch is." Sunstorm stepped forward, going into a fatherly defense.

"Maplepaw, you need to come down now." He told her. "Be very careful."

"I don't know if I can." Maplepaw was sounding scared.

"I'm going down to you, Maplepaw!" Daisypaw was slowly climbing the tree. "Just hold on."

Maplepaw looked towards the ground, fear in her eyes. Jaggedpaw's heart twisted, praying to StarClan that his sister were okay. Maplepaw tried to press against the tree to balance herself more. A crack sounded through the air and Jaggedpaw heard Daisypaw and Maplepaw let out a cry.

Everything happened so fast, Jaggedpaw heard his sister's cry and the shadow falling directly towards him. He moved out of the way and thought he was fine until pain shot through his tail and Jaggedpaw was violently pulled to the forest floor. He let out a cry of pain, but that wasn't the end of it. Maplepaw landed on her paws, but her hind leg gave out from under her and she let out a heartbreaking cry of pain.

"Maplepaw!" Jaggedpaw cried, trying to go to his sister but pain tore through his tail and body like lightning. He yelled out in pain once more and fell to the ground again. He looked at his sister as the other cats swarmed him.

Daisypaw landed on the ground beside Maplepaw and looked at her in a panic. "Are you okay?" She questioned.

"I think so." Maplepaw's voice shook, lined with pain. "I hurt my paw though." She looked over her shoulder at her hind leg.

"What about you, Jaggedpaw?" Hareclaw turned to Jaggedpaw who was pinned by his tail to the ground. The cats looked between the two siblings, Sunstorm looked like he was in a borderline panic.

"Get the branch off of his tail." Featherheart instructed. "And help Maplepaw to her feet, we need to get these two to Sagefeather."

Cedarcloud and Featherheart helped Maplepaw stand up, she leaned against her mentor for support. Sunstorm and Hareclaw, using their strength, heaved the heavy branch off Jaggedpaw's tail. He stood up, despite the harsh pain in his tail.

He looked at his tail, it was bent at an awkward angle. He let out a groan, trying to ignore the intense pain. *Why is this happening to us?* He looked at his sister, worried even more about her than his tail.

"Come on." Sunstorm urged his children back to camp. It was a long, painful walk and Jaggedpaw wished he could help his sister, but the pain was almost too much. He had to clench his jaw just to focus on walking straight, his sister could barely walk at all.

They reached camp and instantly caught the attention of a few cats, one of them being Elmpaw. "What happened to you two?" He asked, running up to the two injured cats.

"Training accident." Was all Jaggedpaw could force out through grit teeth. Sunstorm and the other mentors helped them to the medicine cat den where Sagefeather and Stormsong greeted them with confusion.

"What happened?"

"Maplepaw was climbing a tree when the branch broke. She hurt her paw and the branch landed on Jaggedpaw's tail, it looks broken." Sunstorm explained, helping his kits sit down. Sitting down sent even more, fiery pain through Jaggedpaw's tail.

"Alright," Sagefeather looked at her apprentice. "You get some rush and use it to try and straighten Jaggedpaw's tail. It's hard to fix a broken tail but we can try. Also get him some poppy seeds. I'm going to look at Maplepaw, hopefully it's just a sprain."

Jaggedpaw watched as Stormsong quickly gathered some long, narrow leaves. He assumed it was the rush that Sagefeather had mentioned. "You can also use cobwebs, once it's bound get some nettle and comfrey root to help it heal."

Stormsong gave Jaggedpaw's tail a sniff and began trying to straighten it out with the rush. Jaggedpaw let out a hiss of pain and jerked away from the medicine cat apprentice as she straightened his tail, causing even more pain.

"I'm sorry, Jaggedpaw." Stormsong let out a sigh. "But you need to

let me treat your tail or it's going to hurt forever."

Jaggedpaw sighed and let Stormsong work, trying to force through the pain as she tried to treat his tail. When she finished he glanced over at Maplepaw. "Is she okay?" He questioned, his voice feeling weak.

"She's fine." Sagefeather replied, turning into her herb store. "It's just a sprain, it will heal up here soon. She'll just be off duties for a while." She returned with some green leaves, chewing them into a poultice.

"Will I be off duties?" Jaggedpaw questioned, looking at his crooked, aching tail.

"For a bit, yes." When Sagefeather finished with Maplepaw she came to take a look at Stormsong's work. "A broken tail is a hard break to fix," She mewed. "I can't promise your tail won't stay crooked forever. However, the pain will stop." Sagefeather met his gaze. "You can live with a crooked tail, your balance will just be slightly off. There was an elder in AshClan a while back who broke her tail as a kit and it didn't really matter."

"I hope it doesn't stay like this." Jaggedpaw mumbled falling into a nest. "It hurts."

"Then eat these." Stormsong pushed forward a leaf speckled with black seeds. "Lick them up and get some rest, both of you."

Jaggedpaw lapped up the seeds and closed his eyes, the pain soon faded and Jaggedpaw fell into a gentle sleep.

Chapter 11

"How does it feel?" Sagefeather questioned, watching Maplepaw place her hind paw on the ground.

"Feels fine." Maplepaw replied, lifting her head and looking at the medicine cat with shimmering eyes. "I can walk around and everything!" The golden-brown she-cat paraded around Sagefeather who let out a purr.

"Very well, Maplepaw." Sagefeather stopped her from running around. "You can get back on regular duties, just be careful." Without waiting for another word, Maplepaw took off towards Elmpaw and Jaggedpaw who were watching a few taillengths away. "Stay out of trees! And don't step on your brother's tail!"

Jaggedpaw looked over his shoulder at his tail, Sagefeather had been right in that it stopped hurting but also that he now had a permanent crook in his tail. He was grateful that in the half-moon since Maplepaw fell out of the tree that she was completely fine.

"Congratulations." Elmpaw chuckled as Maplepaw ran up. "Now we don't have to deal with you being so restless."

Maplepaw playfully batted at Elmpaw's nose, who ducked out of the way. "You try being confined to a nest!"

"I'm confined to camp." Elmpaw snorted playfully, twitching his tail.

"Yeah but you can hunt sometimes and you get to *do* things. I had to stay in the medicine cat which stinks of herbs and listen to Sagefeather snore."

"She does snore." Jaggedpaw added, recalling the two days he had spent in there. "And Stormsong mumbles in her sleep."

"Yeah she does." Maplepaw chuckled, then glanced around camp, looking for something. "I'm gonna go tell Cedarcloud that I'm free to

go hunting, I'll see you two later!" Without hesitation, Maplepaw bounded away towards her mentor.

"She's really testing the limits of her injury." Elmpaw pointed out. "Hope she doesn't hurt herself again."

Jaggedpaw nodded, hoping that Maplepaw's injury was completely healed. "If Sagefeather says that she's okay then I'll believe it. I'm sure she'll be fine."

"At least she doesn't have a crooked paw." Elmpaw chuckled, touching Jaggedpaw's tail with his paw. Jaggedpaw looked at his friend who sneered at him, mischief sparking in his amber eyes. "I'm pretty sure you just confirmed your warrior name."

"No kidding." Jaggedpaw snorted. "Whatever," He sighed, stretching out. "It's not a big deal, it's makes me look cool."

"Ah yes," Elmpaw stood up, walking in front of Jaggedpaw. "The mighty warrior, Jaggedtail, defeated only by branches." Jaggedpaw swiped at Elmpaw who jumped back, laughing. He knew that Elmpaw would forever tease him about his tail, but he also knew that Elmpaw didn't mean any harm by it.

"Don't you have an elder's den to clean?" Jaggedpaw flicked his ears, sneering at his friend.

"Nursery, actually." Elmpaw lashed his tail and lifted his head. "I get to spend time with cute kits while you do boring things like hunt and get crushed by branches."

Jaggedpaw rolled his eyes. "Go do your duties, mousebrain." Elmpaw stuck his tongue out and then trotted to Sagefeather's den to get some moss, then to the nursery. Amberflame had given birth to two healthy kits, Foxkit and Flamekit, they were still tiny with closed eyes but Jaggedpaw had to admit they were pretty cute. Hareclaw was almost frequently at the nursery, so training for Jaggedpaw was slow.

"Hey, Jaggedpaw!" Jaggedpaw turned his head to see Patchfoot approaching him. "Have you seen Rowanfang? He's supposed to be

coming on patrol but none of us can find him."

Jaggedpaw blinked, he didn't really keep an eye on Rowanfang but he did realize that he hadn't seen him around all day. "No, I haven't. Sorry, Patchfoot."

"It's alright," Patchfoot sighed and looked around. "Wanna come in his place? I don't want this patrol to be late waiting for him."

"Sure." Jaggedpaw stood up in excitement. "Hareclaw is busy with Foxkit and Flamekit right now."

"That's fine." Patchfoot mewed. "Let's go, we've waited long enough." Jaggedpaw followed the brown and white warrior to the waiting patrol which consisted of Barksong, Poppywing, Mothflame and the newly named Sparrowheart. He and Daisyfern had their warrior ceremony a few days after Jaggedpaw and Maplepaw were injured.

"Jaggedpaw is coming in place of Rowanfang." Patchfoot announced as he approached the waiting patrol. "We don't have time to look for him anymore."

"Alright, then." Barksong stood up. "Let's get going, shall we?" At Patchfoot's lead, the LichenClan patrol went into the forest.

"I saw Maplepaw was going out with Cedarcloud again, is she all healed?" Sparrowheart questioned.

"Yeah," Jaggedpaw replied, looking at the warrior as they walked. "She was cleared today, it wasn't a bad sprain."

"Does your tail still hurt?" Sparrowheart looked at Jaggedpaw's crooked tail. *I'm going to be asked about this for the rest of my life.* Jaggedpaw thought with a twinge of annoyance.

"No it doesn't hurt, but it probably won't straighten out." Jaggedpaw looked ahead, sniffing the air. It was a chilly leaf-fall day, in the mornings the forest would have a small layer frost. *Leafbare is around the corner.* Jaggedpaw thought, fear digging into his belly. *We have a nursery full of kits. Please, StarClan, don't let any of them get sick.* Memories of Robinkit's death flashed in his mind. *I don't*

want Amberflame, Hazelshine or any of the kits in there to go through what we did.

With his mind semi-lost in thought, he barely noticed they had reached the MoonClan border. The scent of MoonClan was a lot of heavier than usual. He perked up his ears, noticing that his Clanmates had scented the same thing.

"Have MoonClan been crossing the border?" Mothflame questioned. "It sure smells like it."

"It does," Patchfoot said, marking the border and covering the MoonClan scent. "I'll report this to Birdstar and she can decide on what to do next. We don't want another fight like the last one." Jaggedpaw tensed slightly.

"Let's hurry home, then." Barksong mewed. "My bones are starting to ache from the cold."

"You're not *that* old, Barksong." Poppywing nudged the brown she-cat.

"I was born before Birdstar," Barksong snapped. "I've got moons on all of you."

"If you feel so old," Patchfoot added. "Then maybe you should retire."

"Just because you're mates with my daughter, Patchfoot," Barksong turned on the spotted tom. "Doesn't mean you can tell me what's best for me. I'll retire when I die."

Jaggedpaw and Sparrowheart shared an amused glance. Barksong had to be the most stubborn cat in LichenClan, a Clan who were known for their stubbornness.

"Don't listen to them, Barksong." Mothflame purred, falling in beside the old she-cat. "You'll outlive us all."

"You're dang right I will!" She lashed her tail. "I've got more fight in me than all of you combined."

Jaggedpaw honestly didn't question Barksong's logic, he assumed her claws were just as strong as her words. *I hope I'm like that when I get older.* Jaggedpaw thought. *That is, if I don't get crushed to death by branches.*

The patrol returned to camp and Patchfoot delivered his news to Birdstar while the rest of them went about their lives. The sun was slowly starting to set and the night was becoming cold. Barksong went into the warrior's den and Jaggedpaw looked around from Elmpaw and Maplepaw. He also couldn't help but notice that Rowanfang was still nowhere in sight.

Jaggedpaw found both cats he was looking for, eating prey near the apprentice den, they had an extra mouse beside them. Maplepaw quickly spotted him, and called him over. "Jaggedpaw! Over here! We got you a mouse!"

With his head high, Jaggedpaw trotted over to the two apprentices and sat down, taking a bite of his mouse, it was still warm. "How was training again?" Jaggedpaw asked, mouth partially full of mouse.

Maplepaw swallowed part of her squirrel and looked at Jaggedpaw. "It was great! I caught a lot of prey, it felt so good to be back out there." She flexed her claws. "How was the patrol? I noticed Hareclaw wasn't with you, though."

"Yeah," Jaggedpaw cast a glance at Elmpaw who was pretty focused on his own mouse. How would he react to all that had happened? "Patchfoot couldn't find Rowanfang so they took me instead." Elmpaw's ears twitched at the mention of his father and he looked up from his meal. "We went to the MoonClan border and found their scent in our territory."

Elmpaw flicked his tail. "Really? Maybe an apprentice had the same idea I did." Elmpaw took another bite of his mouse, he had a very sharp edge to his voice.

"I don't think so." Jaggedpaw mewed. "It was really strong, and MoonClan cats eat fish. Why would they need to come to our territory to catch them. Their entire territory is surrounded by

rivers."

"Who knows?" Elmpaw shrugged and swallowed the rest of his prey. "Let's just hope we handle this a lot better than we handled it before." He stood up and disposed the remains of his prey. "I'm gonna get some sleep, it's cold."

Jaggedpaw sighed and stared at his paws once Elmpaw slipped into the den. "I shouldn't have mentioned any of that."

Maplepaw pressed against Jaggedpaw, he felt comforted by the warmth of his sister. "It's not your fault, Jaggedpaw. Elmpaw's just in a bit of a hard place right now, he still feels bad about killing Blacksky and after everything that happened with Rowanfang..." She sighed, looking up at the dusk sky. "He just needs a little more time."

Jaggedpaw looked up as well, he knew that Maplepaw was right but he couldn't help but worry about the future. What would come of MoonClan crossing the border? Or Elmpaw's struggle with his family. Would greencough run rampant through the Clan this year? Or would they be okay? The thoughts swarming Jaggedpaw's mind gave him a headache and tightened his chest.

"You okay?" Maplepaw questioned, noticing Jaggedpaw tensing.

"Yeah," He shook his head, trying to clear all of his thoughts. "I just need some sleep."

Chapter 12

Jaggedpaw shivered in his sleep. He pressed up against Maplepaw who was close by, she let out a semi-awake mew. Unable to fall back asleep, Jaggedpaw lifted his head, blinking away sleep. Outside the apprentice den it was just after dawn and he could see snow slowly falling. He let out a sigh. *I guess leaf-bare is really here now.*

The apprentice den had become increasingly empty over the past few moons and after Gingerdust and Fieldfoot had been made warriors, Jaggedpaw, Elmpaw and Maplepaw were the only apprentices who remaind. Soon, it would be completely empty until Cherrykit and Applekit were made apprentices.

Jaggedpaw sat up, careful not to wake his sister or Elmpaw and climbed out into the cold morning air. It instantly bit at his nose and ear tips. He suppressed and shivered and took a look around camp. Most cats were still huddled inside, but Jumpheart was out organizing patrols. A group of cats stood around him, including Hareclaw, Breezefall, Daisyfern, Featherheart, Bagderstrike and Krestleflame. Jaggedpaw watched, wondering if he would be joining his mentor at all.

"Featherheart, Badgerstrike, Krestleflame and Daisyfern will be joining me on the patrol to the MoonClan border, we need to make sure they're not crossing the border again. Hareclaw and Breezefall, wake Mosswing, Mothflame, Vinetail and Patchfoot for hunting patrols. Now that we have snow we need to hunt as much prey as possible. Take Jaggedpaw as well, Hareclaw."

At the mention of his name, Jaggedpaw trotted over to his mentor, standing beside him. "Let's go." Jumpheart said and led his patrol out of camp. Hareclaw faced Breezefall.

"Can you go wake the warriors?"

"Sure." Breezefall dipped his head and hurried towards the warriors

den, leaving Hareclaw alone with Jaggedpaw.

"Birdstar has something planned for you three apprentices tonight." Hareclaw told Jaggedpaw, confusing him. What did Birdstar have planned?

"What is it?"

"Not sure yet," Hareclaw shrugged. "She told me last night that you, Maplepaw and Elmpaw were going to be doing something tonight. Something in preparation for your warrior ceremony."

Suddenly, Jaggedpaw was on alert. *Warrior ceremony?* "Is my warrior ceremony soon?" He questioned, trying to contain his excitement. *I've worked so hard for all of this, we all have.*

"Maybe." Hareclaw nudged Jaggedpaw playfully, looking sly. "If you've earned it, that is."

"I think I have." Jaggedpaw puffed his chest out. Hareclaw chuckled as Breezefall approached them with the rest of the warriors for the hunting patrol, they all looked incredibly tired and cold.

"Alright," Hareclaw spoke up, getting the warriors's attention. "Try and spread out, catch as much prey as you can. We need to stockpile in preparation for leaf-bare, you never know what could happen this season, so we need to be ready."

Jaggedpaw looked at Mosswing, her eyes looked slightly glazed over. last leaf-bare was when Robinkit died. *Has it really been that long?* He wondered, it felt like it happened so long ago and yesterday at the same time. *It can't be easy for Mosswing.* Rowanfang still hadn't returned to camp, Birdstar sent out search parties in case had had been injured or killed, but there was no sign of him. Jaggedpaw didn't like Rowanfang, but he really hoped that he was alive somewhere. *For Mosswing's sake.* He knew that they weren't mates anymore, but Mosswing was a very caring she-cat.

Jaggedpaw followed Hareclaw into the forest and the two instantly began looking for prey, the scent of frost burned his nose but he powered through it. *Leaf-bare will only get worse.* Jaggedpaw

reminded himself. *And I have to hunt for the Clan.*

"Go towards towards the AshClan border, but stick to the trees." Hareclaw instructed. "Meet me back here before sunhigh." Jaggedpaw nodded and went into the snowy forest, keeping his eyes, ears and nose on high alert. As he padded through the trees, Jaggedpaw heard the fluttering of wings near him. Jaggedpaw stopped in his tracks and glanced around, spotting a finch resting on a low hanging branch.

Jaggedpaw dropped into a crouch, hoping that his dark fur didn't give him away. The finch seemed completely unaware as it looked around. It wasn't long before the bird fluttered down to the ground and began pecking at the frozen earth. Extended his claws, Jaggedpaw crept forward. He gave a leap and killed the finch before it had a chance to even notice him. He buried his prey in the snow and kept on hunting.

Jaggedpaw found two mice before hunting slowed down. He stalked around the forest, unable to scent any other prey. He heard the fluttering of wings but failed to locate the bird. Despite his frustration, Jaggedpaw continued his hunt. *I wonder if the others are having better luck.* Jaggedpaw wondered, he knew that three pieces of prey was better than nothing but it wasn't good enough for leaf-bare.

After what seemed like forever, Jaggedpaw was able to track down and catch a squirrel. It was just before sunhigh so he figured that he should head back to camp and meet up with Hareclaw. He dug up his other prey and hurried back to camp. Hareclaw was already there, he appeared to have caught two sparrows, a vole and a mouse. His green eyes looked approvingly at Jaggedpaw's haul.

"Very good, why don't you take those mice to the elders?" He suggested. "I'm going to take these sparrows to Amberflame and Hazelshine and then talk to Birdstar about what she has planned for tonight.

"Alright." Jaggedpaw nodded, grabbed his prey, dropped the finch and squirrel off on the fresh-kill pile then went to the elder's den. Inside, Rockflower and Dustfang were lying close together,

presumably trying to keep warm.

"Hello there, Jaggedpaw." Rockflower greeted, lifted her head and blinking at Jaggedpaw.

"I brought you two some mice." Jaggedpaw gave each of the elder's a mouse.

"Thank you, Jaggedpaw." Dustfang dipped his head. Both of the elder's seemed uncharacteristically kind and polite. He didn't think too much of it, and turned out of the den. He saw Hareclaw leaving the nursery and going towards Birdstar's den.

"Jaggedpaw!" Jaggedpaw flicked his ears and turned around, Elmpaw and Maplepaw were walking towards him. Elmpaw's head was low and he looked incredibly irritated, his tail tip twitched with annoyance.

"What's wrong with you?" Jaggedpaw questioned, Elmpaw looked up with indidnance. He let out an angry sigh.

"I hate the cold, my ear tips hurt and it's making me shiver." He looked around. "Plus the snow is going to make hunting a giant pain in the tail."

"You can say that again." Jaggedpaw couldn't help but agree, recalling his earlier hunting. "I went hunting today and could barely find anything." Jaggedpaw looked over his shoulder at Birdstar's den, Hareclaw was still inside. "Hareclaw said that Birdstar had something planned for the three of us today."

Maplepaw tilted her head, confusion bubbling in her eyes. "What is it?"

Jaggedpaw shrugged. "Not sure, Hareclaw is talking to her now." He looked back to the den. "Hareclaw said it was something that could lead up to our warrior ceremonies."

"Maybe it's an assessment?" Elmpaw wondered. "I'd hate to have to do in the snow, though." He shivered once more.

"I'm not sure." Movement caught Jaggedpaw's eye and he watched

Hareclaw climb down from the leader's den. He noticed Jaggedpaw and trotted over to him, Maplepaw and Elmpaw. "So what's going on?" Jaggedpaw questioned his mentor.

"Birdstar is taking you three to the moonstone tonight." Jaggedpaw's jaw dropped, he turned to look at Elmpaw and Maplepaw who seemed just as shocked.

"Are you serious?" Elmpaw questioned, looking at his friends with awe.

Hareclaw nodded. "Every apprentice goes and tonight is your turn." The brown tom looked up at the sky. "We'll be leaving before nightfall, go and get some traveling herbs from Sagefeather.

Jaggedpaw nodded and watched Hareclaw go to the nursery to be with Amberflame again. Jaggedpaw turned to face his sister and Elmpaw. "Can you believe this?"

"I'm honestly surprised Birdstar is letting me leave the territory." Elmpaw blinked. "I thought I was still confined to camp."

"This is different." Maplepaw nudged Elmpaw, who still looked incredibly confused. "You're almost a warrior, I don't think Birdstar would keep you from becoming one just because you killed a cat."

Elmpaw's ear twitched. "I didn't think so either but what if MoonClan sees me?" Jaggedpaw could see how tense Elmpaw had become, was this something he worried about. Jaggedpaw assumed that he never had to worry about it himself because he hadn't done anything like Elmpaw had. *I hope I don't have to, I wouldn't want any cat to die at my claws.*

Maplepaw pressed up against Elmpaw, trying to comfort him. "Even if MoonClan sees us there's nothing they can do about it, we'll be on neutral territory. They won't dare attack us on land so close to the moonstone, StarClan wouldn't approve."

"I guess." Elmpaw didn't seemed convinced, but he stopped replying to Maplepaw. The golden-brown she-cat stepped back, looking upset, sadness darkening her gaze. Jaggedpaw looked at his sister

sympathetically. *I wish there was a way I could help him too, Maplepaw.* Jaggedpaw stifled a sigh and tried to change the subject.

"Why don't we get our travelling herbs?" Jaggedpaw suggested. "We wouldn't want to keep Birdstar waiting." Maplepaw jumped up excitedly, Elmpaw perked up a little but Jaggedpaw could still see that something was haunting his mind.

The three apprentices made their way to the medicine cat den, Jaggedpaw was shocked at the state it was in. Leaves were scattered about and both Sagefeather and Stormsong looked incredibly drained and panicked.

"Is everything okay?" Elmpaw questioned, looking at the two medicine cats with concern and confusion.

Sagefeather whipped around, her green eyes exhausted. "Yes," She replied simply. "Just trying to prep for leaf-bare." She swept away a pile of leaves with her fluffy tail. "What do you three need?"

"We're going to the moonstone, tonight." Jaggedpaw replied. "Hareclaw sent us here to get traveling herbs."

"Right." Sagefeather thought for a moment then turned to Stormsong who was already gathering herbs. "Thank you, Stormsong." She dipped her head then looked back to the apprentices. "Sorry about this." She shuffled her paws, clearly embarrassed about the state her den was in. "Leaf-bare is a stressful time, we just need to make sure we have everything we need."

"I'm sure everything will be fine." Maplepaw purred, her tone as sweet as honey. "You two are wonderful medicine cats and LichenClan is lucky to have you two!"

Maplepaw's words seemed to soothe Sagefeather, she took a deep breath. "Thank you, Maplepaw." The medicine cat turned to Stormsong who had a jawful of herbs. She set them down in front of each apprentice.

"Take these." She instructed. "They'll help with the journey."

"Thank you." Elmpaw thanked the blue-gray she-cat and quickly ate

his herbs along with the others. Jaggedpaw made a face at the bitter herbs, but swallowed them and dipped his head to the two medicine cats.

"Thanks." He dipped his head and the three turned away, leaving Stormsong and Sagefeather to their medicine cat duties.

"I hope they'll be okay." Maplepaw mewed, casting a look back at the medicine cat den. "Leaf-bare can't be easy on them."

Jaggedpaw nodded in agreement, he remembered how guilty Sagefeather was when Robinkit died. *I can't imagine how that feels.*

The three apprentices waited patiently for Birdstar who joined them just as the sun was starting to set. Hareclaw, Skytail and Cedarcloud were also with her. "Are we all ready?" Birdstar questioned. Upon agreement, the group of cats set out.

As the sun went down, the forest got colder. *I wish we didn't have to do this in leaf-bare.* Jaggedpaw thought, shivering as he walked through the cold forest. His paws stung from the snow that stuck to the ground, now even more frozen.

"So what do we do at the moonstone?" Maplepaw asked curiously.

"Well, you won't really be doing anything." Birdstar replied. "Leaders and medicine cats touch their noses to the stone, fall asleep and dream with StarClan but you two will just be there to see the moonstone."

"So we just watch?" Elmpaw sounded skeptical.

Birdstar let out a purr of amusement. "Most apprentices fall asleep, most experience some sort of dream."

Elmpaw stopped talking and just stared ahead. Jaggedpaw wondered if the same thing would happen to him, he couldn't imagine what talking to StarClan would be like. *I wonder if I'll see Robinkit.* His ears twitched, he bet that Elmpaw was thinking the same thing.

They cross the territory, the moon slowly starting to rise. It was late

dusk when they reached the river. "We're jumping across the river." Birdstar instructed. "It's much too cold to swim."

Without hesitation, Birdstar jumped the river and landed on the other side with ease, turning to her Clanmates as she waited for them to cross as well. The rest of the Clan jumped and Jaggedpaw looked into the woods before them. He had only seen it from the other side of the river and it felt strange being here.

They traveled deeper into the woods, everything seemed to be glowing under the late sky. The birch trees that filled this forest were pure white and cast an eerie light. Jaggedpaw couldn't help but feel as if eyes were watching his every move. The way Elmpaw and Maplepaw tensed, he assumed they felt the same way.

In the center of the woods rose a huge birch tree, it's roots twisting and tearing up the ground around it. At the bottom was a pitch black opening into the ground. Jaggedpaw held his breath, something felt incredibly odd about it.

"Don't be afraid when you go inside." Birdstar instructed the apprentices. "Just stay quiet and follow us." She looked up at the sky, it was nearly moonhigh. "Let's go." Birdstar turned and soon her brown pelt was swallowed by the darkest. Jaggedpaw, Maplepaw and Elmpaw followed behind their mentors, each of them vanished into the cave.

"I don't know if I can do this." Elmpaw breathed into Jaggedpaw's ear, sounding incredibly panicked.

"It's okay, Elmpaw." Jaggedpaw whispered back. "We're right here, everything will be okay." Elmpaw swallowed hard, but he continued following with trembling pawsteps. Jaggedpaw stepped into the entrance, feeling a slight breeze. He took a deep breath and entered the darkness, his vision instantly going away. He could hear pawsteps both in front of him and behind him.

The tunnel smelled of dank earth and stone, it was cold and almost overbearing. He could feel his whiskers scrape the walls of the tunnel, reminding him of how tight the space was. Behind him he could hear elmpaw's panicked breaths, he knew that Maplepaw was

behind him so he couldn't turn and run.

Jaggedpaw finally saw a glimpse of light and the slight silhouette of ears in front of him. He narrowed his eyes straining to see. The tunnel opened into a wide cavern, in the center was a dull looking stone. He could see the faint outlines of his Clanmates, and heard Maplepaw and Elmpaw entering the cavern behind him.

It was silent, Jaggedpaw felt as if noise would slice the air like a claw. Suddenly, the stone lit up with a brilliant, silver-blue light that illuminated the entire cave. Jaggedpaw's jaw dropped, his breath catching in his throat. *The moonstone.* It was unlike anything he had ever seen, it sparkled like there were stars inside the stone.

He looked at Elmpaw who had an expression of both awe and terror, he trembled, looking completely paralyzed. Birdstar lay down beside the stone, touching her nose to it and Jaggedpaw watched as her body instantly went limp. The whole event felt surreal, he noticed Skytail, Cedarcloud and Hareclaw laying down as well, keeping their eyes on the stone.

Jaggedpaw did the same, as did Maplepaw and Elmpaw. Elmpaw still seems horrified, Maplepaw just watched in pure awe and wonder. Jaggedpaw looked at the moonstone, watching the stars inside glitter and glimmer. *It's like I'm looking at Silverpelt.* He thought. He was mesmerized by the stone, and before he knew it, Jaggedpaw was asleep.

Jaggedpaw was back in LichenClan territory, it was night and nearly pitch black. He strained his eyes, trying to see the trees around him. *I can't see anything, where is the moon?* He glanced up, there were no stars or moon, just an empty, black sky. Jaggedpaw shivered, the entire scene making him feel uncomfortable. He walked forward, trying to find his way around. He was outside of camp and wanted to get home.

He could he was nearing the camp, but something felt wrong. Dread clawed at Jaggedpaw's belly. *Something isn't right.* He quickened his pace, wanting to get back to camp as soon as possible. It wasn't long before he was sprinting through the pitch black forest, nearly tripping over roots and rocks.

Jaggedpaw could see the camp in the distance, but he felt even more panicked. Not far from him, Jaggedpaw heard the sound of snapping wood. He skidded to a stop and looked around. He noticed a great elm tree was shaking. Jaggedpaw held his breath, hearing the sound of it's roots snapping and pulling through the earth. *It's going to fall on the camp!* Jaggedpaw broke into a sprint into camp. "Run!" He cried, trying to warn his Clanmates. "A tree is falling on the camp! Run!"

He came to a dead stop, the camp was empty. *Have they already evacuated?* Jaggedpaw questioned. He heard more snapping and spun around to see the tree coming directly for him. Jaggedpaw tried to run, but his body was frozen. He couldn't take his eyes off the tree as it came directly for him. *StarClan help me!*

As the tree shadowed over him, nearly crushing him, Jaggedpaw jumped up in alarm. He was back in the moonstone cavern, panting heavily. He looked around, his mind struggling to figure out what happened happened. *It was a dream.* He shook his head, trying to focus. *It was just a dream.* Jaggedpaw looked around the cavern, his Clanmates were still sleeping and the moonstone still shimmered.

Maplepaw was twitching in her sleep and Elmpaw was mumbling, he also looked scared. *I hope his dream is better than mine.* Jaggedpaw thought and sat down, still feeling incredibly on edge. His heart raced in his chest and his paws still shook. *It felt so real.* He let out a sigh and looked around, hoping the others would wake up soon. *I don't want to stay here any longer.*

The moonstone's light started to die out and the cats around him started to wake. Elmpaw sat up, looking incredibly tired for some reason. He looked uncomfortable, but not scared like Jaggedpaw had been.

Birdstar looked to her Clanmates, seeing that they were all up and then led them out of Spirit Tree. As they made their way back home, Jaggedpaw's mind wandered. *I know I was near the moonstone but could that dream really have any meaning?* He looked up at the sky, the moon was slowly falling. *Or was it just a simple nightmare?*

Chapter 13

Coughing woke Jaggedpaw from slumber. He sat up in alarm, looking instantly to Elmpaw and Maplepaw who slept beside him. Neither of them were coughing, or even awake. He tried to calm his racing heartbeat. He had been so concerned with one of them getting sick, but he assumed that the coughing came from outside the den. Jaggedpaw stood up, wide awake now and climbed out. It was just past dawn and snow fell at a steady pace. He bared through the freezing morning air as he looked around.

The coughing seemed to come from near the entrance of the camp. The dawn patrol had returned and Daisyfern was coughing heavily, Breezefall was at her side, looking panicked. "Are you okay, Daisyfern?"

"I'm fine." Daisyfern's voice was dry. "Just swallowed a snowflake." Her blue eyes tried to convince Breezefall but neither him nor the cats around them were convinced.

"I'm taking you to Sagefeather, that's more than just swallowing a snowflake. You know Poppywing is sick too, you need to be treated right away."

Poppywing is sick? Jaggedpaw didn't know that. *Please, StarClan, let this only be whitecough.*" He hoped that Sagefeather and Stormsong had plenty of catmint to treat this sickness.

Jaggedpaw let out a sigh, shivering in the cold air. *I guess leaf-bare truly has begun.* He cast a look towards the nursery, praying that sickness didn't reach any of the cats in there. Jaggedpaw couldn't find Hareclaw so he decided to go hunting on his own, he wanted to catch as much prey as possible and refused to waste time.

By the time he returned he noticed that Fieldfoot was leading Gingerdust to the medicine cat den, the ginger she-cat coughing furiously. Jaggedpaw was instantly on edge. He deposited his small catch of two mice and went to where Elmpaw was bringing prey to

the elder's

"Hey." He greeted.

"Hi." Elmpaw replied through the squirrel in his jaws. Jaggedpaw followed him to the elders where Rockflower was up against the wall, almost as if she was trying to hide herself.

"Rockflower?" Jaggedpaw called into the den, Dustfang sat on the other side, looking annoyed. "What's going on?"

"Rockflower is being weird." Dustfang snorted. "She's staying over there and won't come near me."

"Please, Dustfang." Rockflower replied, Jaggedpaw was alarmed at how dry her voice sounded. "I just need my space."

"Yeah, right." Dustfang rolled his eyes and turned away from the old she-cat. Jaggedpaw narrowed his eyes, looking at Rockflower. Her eyes and nose were streaming, Jaggedpaw tensed.

"Rockflower," He made his voice as calm as possibly, Elmpaw gave him a confused look. "Are you sick?"

There was a moment of silence, Dustfang suddenly looked at Rockflower in realization. Rockflower hid her face. "No," She replied, clearly holding back a cough. "I'm fine."

"Rockflower." Dustfang stood up, approaching his den mate. "Don't tell me that, there's a reason you're acting this way."

"Get back!" She spat, Dustfang stopped and looked at the apprentices, pleading for help.

"Rockflower," Elmpaw stepped closer to her, she pressed her gray fur further against the wall. "If you don't want Dustfang to get sick then the best way to do that is to go to the medicine cat den where Sagefeather and Stormsong can look after you."

"I'm fine." Rockflower urged. "Sagefeather and Stormsong need to use their herbs on younger cats. I'll be just fine."

Elmpaw and Jaggedpaw shared an uneasy glance. "Rockflower, Sagefeather will feel horrible if she doesn't help you. You're part of the Clan just as Daisyfern, Poppywing and Gingerdust are." Jaggedpaw hoped he could reason with her. "You need to let Sagefeather treat you."

"Please, Rockflower." Dustfang added, sadness clouding his eyes. "I don't want to live in this den alone, after losing Tigercloud last season I don't want to lose you too."

Rockflower was silent for a moment before letting out a sigh. "Very well." The old she-cat stood up and looked at the other apprentices. "I'll go see Sagefeather." She didn't sound very thrilled about it. Jaggedpaw and Elmpaw helped her to the medicine cat den. Inside, Gingerdust, Poppywing and Daisyfern were all in nests and being looked after by the medicine cats.

"Sagefeather," Jaggedpaw called, getting the medicine cat's attention. She looked incredibly frantic. "Rockflower is sick." He could see even more light leaving Sagefeather's green eyes.

"Alright," She took a deep breath. "Stormsong, make her nest and get Rockflower some tansy. We need to hold on to our catmint if things get worse."

Jaggedpaw couldn't stay and watch any longer, he and Elmpaw turned away. "I can't believe it's coming on so quickly." Elmpaw mewed, staring at the snowy ground. "Just yesterday, every cat seemed fine." Jaggedpaw nodded, it had only been half a moon since they made their trip to the moonstone and how four cats were sick. *How many more?*

Two days had passed since whitecough had broken out in the camp and even more cats had joined them in the medicine cat den. Kestrelflame and Patchfoot had both come down with sickness and were now being cared for by Sagefeather and Stormsong. The Clan was starting to get nervous.

"Let all cats old enough to catch their own prey gather around the High Stump for a Clan meeting!" Birdstar's call suddenly rang out through the camp. Jaggedpaw looked at Maplepaw who was eating

prey with confusion. Elmpaw joined them as they gathered around their leader, none of them knew what was going on. "As many of you know," Birdstar started speaking. "Sickness is spreading through LichenClan quickly. To avoid getting sick it is recommended that all cats stay away from the medicine cat den. If you feel *any* signs of sickness then you are to go to Sagefeather and Stormsong immediately. We've survived sickness before but we don't want any cats lost this leaf-bare. Sagefeather and Stormsong are doing their absolute best and I want to thank them for their service." The Clan cheered for their medicine cats. Jaggedpaw was grateful that they had such good medicine cats.

"On another note," Birdstar continued. "MoonClan has been making aggressive notions on the border. We've scented them across the border and the scent is stronger than usual. I don't want MoonClan to think they can do whatever they want but now is not the time for a fight. If you encounter any MoonClan cats on the border, please do not challange them."

Beside Jaggedpaw, Elmpaw tensed. *He must think they're talking about what he did.* He looked at Elmpaw, hoping that one day his friend would be able to forgive himself for what he did.

"This meeting is dismissed." Birdstar dipped her head and jumped down from the high stump, going to speak to Jumpheart. Jaggedpaw twitched his ears, sickness was stressful enough, why did MoonClan have to continuously cause trouble? Jaggedpaw let out a sigh and went to find Hareclaw to see if he could keep his paws busy. *I can't sit around in the cold waiting to see what happens with the sickness or MoonClan, I need to hunt and keep my Clan fed.*

Chapter 14

Jaggedpaw walked alongside Hareclaw as they neared the MoonClan border. Their patrol was lead by Featherheart and included Sunstorm, Ashstream, and Breezefall. As they neared the border, a strong scent wafted over Jaggedpaw. It smelled like squirrel blood, he was confused as were his Clanmates. It wasn't until they reached the border that they saw what was causing the scent.

The snow was stained red as a dead squirrel lie just next to the river. "What in the name of StarClan?" He questioned. Featherheart approached it and gave it a sniff. "MoonClan." She growled. "It reeks of them, they caught it on our territory and left it? Are they mousebrained?"

"Are they really wasting prey in leaf-bare? On our land too." Ashstream extended her claws. "What are they trying to say?"

"It's a challenge." Sunstorm spoke up. "They've been pushing our borders but they're not even trying to be secretive about it. They want us to fight them."

"We can't give in to them" Hareclaw stood beside Jaggedpaw's father. "We have to worry about with a medicine cat den full of sick cats who are only getting worse."

"If we don't do something about it then they'll just keep hunting on our lands." Ashstream noted. "We can't let them think they can walk all over us."

"Birdstar clearly said we are not to cause problems with MoonClan no matter what they do." Featherheart's tone was harsh, Ashstream flattened her ears. "We're going back to camp to report this to Birdstar and she will decide on what to do."

The rest of the patrol nodded along, burying the killed squirrel and slowly making their way back to camp. Jaggedpaw dragged his tail through the snow. He hated the fact that MoonClan was stealing

and wasting LichenClan prey, and LichenClan couldn't do anything about it. He sighed heavily and walked through the forest.

Behind Jaggedpaw, he heard coughing. The entire patrol stopped and turned to looked at Breezefall who was hunched over, coughing heavily. His body trembled as he coughed, his legs shaking.

"Breezefall," Featherheart stepped closer to him. "How long have you been coughing like this?"

"It-It just started today." Breezefall tried clearing his throat, only to cough more. "I just had a dry throat last night, I thought it was nothing."

"You need to get to Sagefeather." Featherheart urged. Breezefall didn't complain, the patrol quickened their pace back to camp so Breezefall could get to the medicine cat den. Jaggedpaw tensed. *How many more cats are going to get sick?*

The scene in camp was unsettling, cats were pacing and looking incredibly downtrodden. Jaggedpaw hurried to Maplepaw who was sitting near Cedarcloud. "What's going on?" He questioned.

"Sagefeather took most of the sick cats to outside the camp in the old badger den." Her green eyes were dark. "Rockflower is dying."

"What?" Jaggedpaw's heart twisted into a knot, he looked towards the medicine cat den where Breezefall was headed. Stormsong met him outside and guided him out of camp. *Rockflower can't die!* Jaggedpaw looked towards the elder's den. *I don't want to live in this den alone, after losing Tigercloud last season I don't want to lose you too.* Dustfang's words rang in Jaggedpaw's ears, tearing at his heart like claws. *Please, StarClan. Don't take Rockflower from us!*

The Clan waited around in silent fear for a long time, all eyes went to Sagefeather as she stepped out of the den. Jaggedpaw's heart dropped as he saw her expression, he heard Maplepaw let out a gasp beside him. He knew that expression all too well, it was the same expression she carried when Robinkit died.

"Sagefeather..?" Birdstar approached the medicine cat, clearly

forcing herself to sound hopeful. Sagefeather's lack of a response gave the Clan the answer they didn't want to hear. Birdstar lowered her head. "I know you did what you could, Sagefeather." Birdstar nuzzled the medicine cat, clearly they were close friends. *How many more will die?* Jaggedpaw questioned, could the Clan risk losing more than one cat? *Not to mention all that's happening with MoonClan.* He closed his eyes, praying to StarClan. *Please, protect my Clan.*

After Rockflower's vigil in the cold, Jaggedpaw crawled into his nest. Maplepaw and Elmpaw all huddled incredibly close, both to keep warm and mourn the loss of their elder. Rockflower was an incredible cat, Jaggedpaw wished that she didn't have to die. He closed his eyes and fell into an uneasy sleep. His dreams were empty and black, he could only hear noises around him.

He could hear the rustling and trees and voices as well. The voices were somewhat familiar, but he couldn't place them. He also heard pawsteps and the crunching of snow. He wished he could see what was happening.

"Who is keeping guard?" One of the voices spoke, Jaggedpaw couldn't place who it belonged to. *What's happening?*

"I think Mothflame is." *Why are they talking about LichenClan cats?*

"Where is the medicine cat den?"

"It's near the nursery."

"What if there's sick cats in there?"

"Just ignore them, grab the leaves and get out."

"Thorntalon, that's your job, do you understand?"

Jaggedpaw opened his eyes, suddenly realizing that he wasn't dreaming. He looked around, still hearing the voices and pawsteps. *Thorntalon...* Jaggedpaw thought, then alarm shot through his body like lightning. *He's a MoonClan warrior.*

Jaggedpaw exploded out of the apprentice den, instantly getting the

attention of Mothflame who jumped to her paws. "MoonClan is attacking!" He cried out as loud as he possibly could, behind him he heard the alarmed mews of Elmpaw and Maplepaw. "Wake up!" He ran around camp. "MoonClan is attacking our camp!"

"MoonClan cats, attack!" Suddenly the clearing had more than just Jaggedpaw and Mothflame in it as MoonClan swarmed into the camp. LichenClan cats were swarming out of their dens to face the invasion.

Jaggedpaw was instantly taken down by a brown tom. He let out a hiss and slashed at the cat who attacked him. He felt teeth digging into his flank, Jaggedpaw's claws found the cat's head and he raked them down his face. The cat let out a cry and let go of Jaggedpaw, allowing him to get back to his paws.

The cat that Jaggedpaw faced was Cedarclaw, his amber eyes blazed with the fire of battle. With a ferocious hiss, Cedarclaw lept once more, landing directly on Jaggedpaw's shoulders. Jaggedpaw bucked, knocking Cedarclaw off. He spun around and lashed at the MoonClan warrior, catching his nose with his claw.

Jaggedpaw hissed and dropped to the ground, getting underneath Cedarclaw and clawing at his belly. Cedarclaw cried out and Jaggedpaw slipped back and jumped to his paws, Cedarclaw quickly backed away and ran off. Jaggedpaw breathed heavily, blood roaring in his ears.

He saw Maplepaw fighting with a gray she-cat who looked to be an apprentice, but Maplepaw was clearly much older and stronger than her. Jaggedpaw's sister grabbed the she-cat by her scruff and threw her towards her Clan. The apprentice got to her paws and ran in the same direction of Cedarclaw.

Jaggedpaw turned to his sister, making sure she was okay. Maplepaw just had a few scratches that barely bled. Jaggedpaw heard loud hissing near by and saw Hareclaw wrestling with a large brown tom who had him pinned. Hareclaw bleed from deep wounds on his shoulders and appeared to be struggling quite a bit.

Jaggedpaw quickly ran to the aid of his mentor, jumping onto the

brown warrior's back and digging his claws deep into his sides. The tom reared up, hissing in anger. Jaggedpaw struggled to hang up as the cat tried to buck him off. Jaggedpaw felt himself falling but kept his claws in the cat's side, tearing through his flesh as he fell onto the ground.

The tom whirled around to face Jaggedpaw who was already back on his paws. The warrior lashed out, his claws raking Jaggedpaw's leg. He let out a cry and stumbled backwards, feeling blood run down his foreleg.

Jaggedpaw heard a cry from Hareclaw and saw his mentor slash his claws into the warrior's back. He spun around to Hareclaw once more, Jaggedpaw used this moment to attack once again.

Another cat slammed into Jaggedpaw's side, pinning him to the ground. All Jaggedpaw saw was brown fur that blocked his vision. The cat stepped on his tail, sending pain up his body as he stepped right on the crook. Jaggedpaw hissed and bit into the only flesh he could find. The tom growled and pushed Jaggedpaw down even harder, digging claws into his fur.

Jaggedpaw struggled to get out from under this warrior, he finally got his head free and noticed a cat slinking around in the shadows. It was a brown tabby, he was going for the medicine cat den. Jaggedpaw suddenly remembered the conversation he heard before the battle started. The cat closest to the medicine cat den was Elmpaw who wrestled with the apprentice, Shadowpaw.

"Elmpaw!" Jaggedpaw cried, getting his friend's attention as he batted away Shadowpaw. "Stop him!" He struggled to motion towards Thorntalon. "He's going for the medicine cat den!"

Elmpaw's eyes went wide and he immediately left Shadowpaw, running for Thorntalon who made a break for the medicine cat den. Elmpaw cut him off and tackled him to the ground. "What do you want with our medicine cat den?" Elmpaw demanded.

"That's not of your business, *murderer."* Thorntalon hissed, slashing his claws at Elmpaw's face. Blood sprayed the ground, staining the snow and Elmpaw stumbled back in pain. Jaggedpaw was still

struggling with the warrior who pinned him, but the weight was suddenly relieved when Hareclaw pulled him off, he had clearly sent the other one running.

Jaggedpaw turned his attention back to Elmpaw, blood poured from several wounds across his face but continued fighting Thorntalon. "Stay away from my medicine cat den!" Elmpaw hissed with fury, Jaggedpaw saw an intense fire in his eyes. He lashed out with claws, ripping across Thorntalon's chest. "And *get out of my camp!*" Thorntalon was clearly in pain, bleeding heavily from the wounds on his chest.

With a stumble, Thorntalon retreated, running directly for Cloudwind. She let out a cry of frustration before lifting her voice. "MoonClan, retreat!" The MoonClan cats turned tail and quickly fled from LichenClan camp, leaving the LichenClan warriors with their wounds. Jaggedpaw looked towards Elmpaw, despite the wounds on his face his eyes burned brightly and he stood tall. *He looks like a warrior.* Jaggedpaw thought. *No.* Jaggedpaw realized. *He looks like a leader.*

When the MoonClan cats were gone, Stormsong and Sagefeather quickly swarmed the cats, trying to find the most wounded of the Clan. Stormsong inspected Elmpaw's wounds, quickly applying herbs to them. Jaggedpaw sat down, feeling exhausted. He had a few wounds that burned, but none of them felt incredibly dangerous. Sagefeather was helping Vinetail who had a deep wound on her side that looked pretty bad. However, despite that every cat LichenClan seemed to be doing okay.

After cats were cleared by either Sagefeather or Stormsong, they were sent back to sleep with the exception of Badgerstrike, Ashstream and Fieldfoot who were put on guard to make sure that MoonClan didn't return.

As Jaggedpaw made his way to the warrior's den, he was stopped by Jumpheart. He turned to the deputy who had an herb covered torn ear. "Jaggedpaw," He mewed. "Birdstar wants to talk to you."

Jaggedpaw blinked, he honestly wanted to sleep but he was curious as to what Birdstar wanted. He followed Jumpheart to the leader's

den where Birdstar was sitting. She had herbs covering a long wound on her side.

"Thank you for coming, Jaggedpaw. I understand you must be tired." Jaggedpaw just nodded. "I want to thank you, you were the one who warned the Clan of MoonClan's invasion, I don't know what would've happened if you didn't hear them."

Jaggedpaw's pelt burned slightly, he dipped his head. "You're welcome, I glad that I was able to hear them."

"I've spoken with your mentor who watched not only yours but your sister's and Elmpaw's display at fighting. He told me how fiercely Elmpaw defended the medicine cat den against Thorntalon who was planning on stealing herbs from us." Jaggedpaw blinked in surprise. He was going to steal herbs? "Hareclaw, Cedarcloud, Skytail and myself agree that it is time for you all to become warriors."

Jaggedpaw stood up in shock. "Really?"

Birdstar nodded, amusement fluttering in her green eyes. "You've all earned it. Tomorrow we will hold the ceremony."

"Thank you," Jaggedpaw bowed his head. "Thank you so much."

"Thank *you*, Jaggedpaw. You're more than ready to be a warrior."

Chapter 15

Jaggedpaw held his head high, waiting for the ceremony to start. He sat with Elmpaw and Maplepaw who looked equally excited and terrified. *We're finally being made warriors.* He cast a glance Elmpaw whose eyes were a storm of emotions. He nudged Elmpaw, getting his attention. The wounds on his face were still fresh but were covered in a thick layer of herbs.

Coughing pulled Jaggedpaw's attention away. *I wish we didn't have to have our ceremony at this time.* He didn't want the Clan to forget about Rockflower's death, but he also was glad they had something else to think about. His feelings about the whole thing were incredibly conflicted.

"Are you ready?" Elmpaw questioned, his amber eyes curious as he looked at Jaggedpaw and Maplepaw.

"I am." Jaggedpaw replied, he certainly was. He had never been more certain of anything in his life. It was just the situation that made him feel uncertain.

"Me too" Maplepaw mewed. "I've been waiting for this for a long time, we all have." She looked at Elmpaw. "Are you ready?"

"I've been working so hard for it." Elmpaw stared at the snowy ground. "I want every cat to look at me for a good warrior than the foolish apprentice I was when I killed Blacksky."

"We already look at you like that." Maplepaw purred, Elmpaw looked at her with a gentle gaze. "And we always will."

"Thank you." Elmpaw purred. "I'm just excited to become a warrior."

"So am I." Jaggedpaw held his head high. They looked towards the leader's den, seeing movement as Birdstar and Jumpheart exited the den.

"It's time." Jaggedpaw said to his friends and they started walking towards the center of camp.

Birdstar made it before them, jumping up on the High Stump with Jumpheart taking his place beside it. "Let all cats old enough to catch their own prey gather around the High Stump for a Clan meeting!"

The cats of LichenClan lifted their heads and began walking towards the center of camp, Jaggedpaw took a deep breath and sat down before Birdstar. He could feel Maplepaw tremble beside him with excitement, Elmpaw held his head high as he waited for the ceremony to begin. Fawnsky and Sunstorm caught his eye, he turned his head to see his parents sitting beside Mosswing, all three of them with pride bursting out of them.

Feeling their pride made Jaggedpaw feel immensely better about the whole ceremony. Jaggedpaw turned his gaze back on Birdstar who waited patiently for her Clan to gather. From the medicine cat den, Jaggedpaw could hear coughing. He refrained from sighing sadly, he wished that the Clan wasn't full of sick cats right now.

"I've gathered you all today because our three apprentices showed incredible bravery during the battle against MoonClan. Thanks to Jaggedpaw we were able to react and drive MoonClan back to their own territory." Jaggedpaw could hear the celebratory mews from his Clanmates, he ducked his head slightly, feeling awkward being the center of attention."Maplepaw fought so hard, driving out warriors and apprentices alike without hardly any wounds." Maplepaw also looked bashful, looking around as her Clanmates celebrated her. "And Elmpaw drove Thorntalon, a warrior with much more experience than him, away and saved our herbs from being stolen." Elmpaw didn't look bashful, he instead held his head eye as his amber eyes burned brightly.

"They've waited a long time for this, and it is now time." Birdstar jumped down from the High Stump, facing the three eager apprentices. "I, Birdstar, leader of LichenClan, call upon my warrior ancestors to look down on these apprentices. They have trained long and hard to understand the ways of your noble code and I commend them to you as warriors in their turn." Jaggedpaw tensed.

It's finally time.

"Jaggedpaw, Maplepaw and Elmpaw. Do you promise to uphold the warrior code and defend the Clan even at the cost of your lives?"

"I do." Jaggedpaw had never spoken words truer. He could feel it in his heart that he was ready.

"I do." Maplepaw's voice was loud and clear, she was also ready.

"I do." Elmpaw was bold and steady, Jaggedpaw never doubted him.

"Then by the powers of StarClan, I give you your warrior names! Jaggedpaw, from this day forward you will be known as Jaggedtail. LichenClan honors your bravery and focus." Not shocked about his name, but loving it all the same, Jaggedtail stepped forward to Birdstar. She touched her nose to his head and he licked her shoulder before stepping back.

"Maplepaw, from this day forward you will be known as Maplepool. LichenClan honors your skills and intelligence." Jaggedtail felt his heart fill with love and admiration for his sister as she stepped forward, licking Birdstar's shoulder. *I'm so proud of you.* He thought, she truly was an incredible warrior.

"Elmpaw, from this day forward you will be known as Elmheart. LichenClan honors your loyalty and dedication." Elmheart stood up, eyes glowing and head high. He licked Birdstar's shoulder and stepped back, Jaggedtail watched his friend with pride. "I welcome you all as full warriors of LichenClan!"

"Jaggedtail! Maplepool! Elmheart!" The Clan cheered, out of all the voices Jaggedtail could hear his parents and Mosswing the loudest.

"Birdstar?" A rough voice spoke out from the crowd, the Clan turned to see Barksong standing up, her amber her eyes trembling. "I'd like to ask something."

"Alright, Barksong." Birdstar said, looking at the old she-cat with curiosity. "What is it?"

"I want to move into the elder's den." Jaggedtail was taken aback,

Barksong had said not too long ago that she wouldn't ever join the elder's den.

"Are you sure, Barksong?" Cedarcloud stepped forward, eyes filled with concern for her mother.

"I am." Barksong lowered her ears. "With Rockflower's death I realize how I old I really am. Dustfang is alone now in the elder's den and I don't want that. He needs a cat to look after him, and that cat is going to be me."

"Very well, Barksong." Barksong moved to the center of camp, Jaggedtail and the others gave her room. "Barksong, is it your wish to give up the name of a warrior and go to join the elders?"

"It is." Barksong's voice trembled slightly.

"Your Clan honors you and all the service you have given to us. I call upon StarClan to give you many moons of rest."

"Barksong! Barksong!" The Clan cheered their newest elder and the Clan meeting was over. Jaggedtail, Maplepool and Elmheart turned to their parents who swarmed them with love and joy.

"I'm so proud of all of you!" Fawnsky purred, nuzzling each cat in turn.

"You all earned this." Mosswing brushed up against her son. Elmheart purred in return. He turned and looked at Jaggedtail, mischief sparking in his eyes.

"Guess I was right about your warrior name." He teased. Jaggedtail swiped playfully at his friend who ducked out of the way laughing.

"Your name should've been Scarface." Jaggedtail sneered.

"Scars are cooler than a crooked tail."

Jaggedtail went after Elmheart, he ran around and hid behind his mother who just laughed. "Honestly, you two. You're warriors now."

Elmheart stopped and sneered at Fawnsky. "I'll always have a kit

inside me."

"We all know that." Mosswing teased, flicking her tail over Elmheart's ear. "Now, you've got a long night ahead of you. Vigils in leaf-bare are never fun."

"My vigil was in the dead of leafbare." Sunstorm shivered. "When it was over I thought my paws were frozen to the ground!" Jaggedtail suddenly began dreading the vigil he would be holding tonight.

"Oh, that's enough." Fawnsky nudged her mate. "Don't listen to him, it won't be that bad."

"We can handle it." Maplepool purred. "We've handled *much* worse."

Chapter 16

Jaggedtail suppressed a shiver as he stepped out of the warrior's den, leaf-bare had a strong, icy grip over the forest and the cats of LichenClan were still suffering. The medicine cat den was full of sick cats, and both medicine cats worked tirelessly to keep them alive. No new cats had fallen ill, and not had gotten as sick as Rockflower had been but Jaggedtail was still terrified at losing another Clanmate.

It had been a moon since Rockflower's death and Jaggedtail's warrior ceremony, things were incredibly rough in LichenClan territory as leaf-bare continued to ravage the forest. Hunting was slow and nearly every cat in the camp was hungry. Jaggedtail wondered if the other Clans were struggling this much, he figured that he would find out at the gathering if they were. This would be his first gathering as a warrior, and he was both incredibly excited and terrified.

He wondered what MoonClan would say about their invasion and attempt to steal herbs, once again Jaggedtail was glad that the plan had been foiled. *Without herbs all of our sick cats would surely die.* Patchfoot was incredibly sick, but he was being kept alive with the catmint that Sagefeather and Stormsong had. Jaggedtail did his best to not worry too much about the struggles of leaf-bare. *Fear doesn't fill bellies.* Jaggedtail reminded himself each time he felt the panic of losing Clanmates cloud over him. Last leaf-bare had claimed Robinkit, he didn't want it to happen again. *I can't heal the sick cats, but I can keep them fed.*

Jaggedtail looked around LichenClan camp, it was early morning and the dawn patrol had already been sent out but Jaggedtail could tell that Jumpheart hadn't organized the rest of the patrols for the day yet, he was hoping to go on a hunting patrol. He always felt at ease when he was hunting, especially when he caught prey. He scanned the camp for Jumpheart but couldn't find the deputy.

He noticed that Applekit and Cherrykit were running in excited

circles around their mother who watched with glowing eyes. Movement by the leader's den caught his eye and Jaggedtail looked towards the tree. Jumpheart and Birdstar climbed down from the den and heading to the center of the camp. Birdstar jumped up onto the High Stump and Jaggedtail knew she was about to call a Clan meeting.

"Let all cats old enough to catch their own prey gather around the High Stump for a Clan meeting!" Her voice spoke out through the territory, getting the attention of the warriors of LichenClan. Behind Jaggedtail, Elmheart stepped out of the warrior's den.

"What's going on?" He asked with a heavy yawn.

"Not sure." Jaggedtail looked back towards Applekit and Cherrykit, they were now sprinting towards the center of camp with Hazelshine chasing after them. Both their eyes burned with excitement and Jaggedtail understood. "Looks like Applekit's and Cherrykit's apprentice ceremony."

"Cool." Elmheart replied, stretching in front of the den. "Let's go watch." Together, Elmheart and Jaggedtail joined the crowd of cats gathered to watch the ceremony. Jaggedtail looked around for Maplepool but couldn't find her, and she hadn't been in the den. He assumed that his sister had been part of the dawn patrol, he hoped she would return soon.

Once the Clan had gathered, Birdstar began speaking. "I've gathered the Clan today because two of our kits have reached the age of six moons and are ready to start their journey to become warriors." In the center of the crowd, Applekit and Cherrykit wiggled with excitement.

From the side of the crowd, Hazelshine watched with so much pride burning in her eyes. Once again Jaggedtail found himself wondering who Applekit and Cherrykit's father was, but Hazelshine never revealed who it was and Jaggedtail respected that. He cast a quick glance at Elmheart. *Sometimes, cats are better off without their fathers.*

"By naming apprentices we show that LichenClan will remain strong

for many moons to come. Applekit, from this day forward until you have earned your warrior name you will be known as Applepaw. The mentor I've chosen for you is Sparrowheart, he is an incredibly strong and intelligent warrior and I know that he will train you well." Applepaw stepped forward as Sparrowheart stepped out of the crowd and the two of them touched noses, starting Applepaw's apprenticeship. Once Applepaw and Sparrowheart sat down, Birdstar continued. "Cherrykit, from this day forward until you have earned your warrior name you will be known as Cherrypaw. Your mentor will be Daisyfern, a smart and dedicated warrior who will teach you everything you need to know." Cherrypaw and Daisyfern repeated what Applepaw and Sparrowheart had done before returning to the crowd.

"Applepaw! Cherrypaw! Applepaw! Cherrypaw!" The cats of LichenClan cheered their newest apprentices and the meeting disbanded, Applepaw and Cherrypaw eagerly got started talking to their mentors. Jaggedtail suddenly recalled what his first day as an apprentice had been like, he had been so excited and so lucky to have been given Hareclaw as a mentor.

With the meeting over, cats began padding over to Jumpheart to get assigned to patrols. Elmheart and Jaggedtail followed the rest of the Clan and listened to what the deputy had to say. "I want the sunhigh patrol to check the MoonClan border, make sure they haven't tried anything else. They've been relaxed for the past moon but you never know. Sunstorm, you'll lead that patrol and take Vinetail, Cedarcloud, Featherheart and Mosswing with you. Then I want two hunting patrols covering the territory. Badgerstrike will lead one, taking Ashstream, Skytail, Mothflame and Jaggedtail. I will lead the other and will take Fieldfoot, Fawnsky, Hareclaw and Elmheart.

With the assignments passed out, the various patrols grouped up and started to head out. Jaggedtail wished he could be hunting with Elmheart, but was happy to be out in the forest all the same.

After a long day of hunting, Jaggedtail returned with three skinny squirrels he caught himself along with the rest of what his patrol had caught. It wasn't the most bountiful hunt but it was better than nothing. Jumpheart's patrol had also brought back a decent amount

of prey, it was enough to feed the Clan if every cat shared. The biggest priority was the elders and Amberflame's kits. They would be apprenticed in a few moons, but they still needed prey most of all, they were young and could easily get sick.

With the day coming to a close, LichenClan was beginning to prepare for the gathering. Jaggedtail wasn't so sure he was looking forward to sitting out in the cold, but he wouldn't dare miss his first gathering as a warrior. He, Elmheart and Maplepool were all incredibly excited about this moment, it was one of the most important moments in a warrior's life.

LichenClan braved the cold and started out towards the gathering hollow. They arrived just after AshClan and MoonClan arrived shortly after. All of LichenClan tensed at the sight of MoonClan, Jaggedtail felt the fur on his spine rise up when he saw the cats of MoonClan. He noticed something odd, however, it wasn't Owlstar leading the Clan into the gathering hollow, it was Cloudwind. She had Ivystone by her side, her green eyes stoic and fierce. *Where's Owlstar? Did he die?* Jaggedtail didn't recall seeing Owlstar in the battle in LichenClan camp.

Cloudwind didn't say anything to Birdstar, only shooting the leader a toxic glare. *If looks could kill.* Jaggedtail thought with a flick of his ears. As they waited for SunClan to arrive, Jaggedtail couldn't help but noticed that Goldenstar was absent as well with Ivyheart in her stead. *Did* two *leaders die?* Last time Jaggedtail had seen Goldenstar she looked sickly, he hoped that greencough didn't claim the final life of AshClan's leader.

"SunClan is here!" Ivystone called out from beside Cloudwind and all the cats in the hollow turned their attention to Foxstar as he lead his Clan into the hollow.

"I apologize for being late." Foxstar apologized upon reaching the other Clans.

"It's fine, Foxstar." Birdstar nodded, assuring the ginger tom. "Let's just get this started so we can go home."

Jaggedtail settled down beside Elmheart and his sister as the

leader's climbed up into their trees. It was Ivyheart who spoke up first. "I will start, so I can explain why I am here instead of Goldenstar." Jaggedtail listened curiously. "Goldenstar isn't dead, but she is too sick to travel right now. AshClan has been dealing with a terrible outbreak of greencough that has taken the life of our beloved warrior Tawnyfrost."

The Clans held a moment of silence for the fallen warrior and despite the sadness of loss, Jaggedtail was glad that LichenClan wasn't alone in their struggles. *Clearly all the Clans are struggling.* Next was Cloudwind, both she and Birdstar ignored each other.

"I wish I could say the same about Owlstar being too sick to travel, but unfortunately Owlstar lost his final life to greencough. I am proud to be leader after his wonderful rule, and my new deputy is Ivystone." *Maybe that's why they were trying to steal herbs.* Jaggedtail thought. *They should've asked, they clearly didn't think that we had sick cats as well.*

Jaggedtail was surprised to see Birdstar speak up, directly to Cloudstar. "Owlstar was an incredibly noble and kind cat." Birdstar dipped her head. "He will be very missed, but I know you will be a wonderful leader, Cloudstar." Cloudstar looked at Birdstar, and Jaggedtail couldn't read the new leader's expression. *She's probably to grief stricken to start a fight right now. At least Birdstar is trying to be civil.* Cloudstar looked away from Birdstar and continued speaking. "Owlstar was not our only death, however. We lost our elder Haretooth and we still have a few sick cats."

"Haretooth was a good friend and a great warrior." The lone SunClan elder, Fishtail, spoke up from the crowd. She was sitting with Barksong and Dustfang as well as elders from the other Clans.

"I'll go next." Birdstar stood up as Cloudstar sat back down on her tree. "LichenClan too has been dealing with the horrors of greencough, we've only lost one cat and that was our own elder, Rockflower. A stubborn yet proud and brave she-cat." Another moment of silence was held, Jaggedtail felt pain in his chest at the mention of their dead elder. "In spite of their loss, however. I am proud to welcome three new warriors; Jaggedtail, Maplepool and Elmheart!"

As the Clans cheered, Jaggedtail and his friends held their heads high. He couldn't help but notice that MoonClan didn't cheer, and most had glares directed directly at Elmheart. Elmheart either didn't notice or didn't care, his amber eyes glowed fiercely with pride as the Clans celebrated him as a warrior. *He's strong, alright.* Jaggedtail thought with a purr.

Birdstar sat down and looked towards SunClan's leader. "It's your turn, Foxstar." She mewed.

Foxstar stood up and began speaking. "Thank you, Birdstar." He dipped his head. "SunClan has not been spared by greencough either this season. Our queen, Rowanfall had three kits but two of those kits died to sickness, the other remains sick. We lost our warrior Firetail as well."

Jaggedtail felt his heart twist. *Kits lost, nothing could be more tragic.* The Clans held a very long moment of silence for the kits and Firetail. "Before this gathering comes to a close," Birdstar stood up, addressing the Clans. "I just want to take this moment to appreciate the medicine cats of our Clans. They've worked so hard to keep our Clans healthy, and though I don't see any of them here tonight we know that they were working so hard to keep our Clanmates alive."

The Clans cheered for their medicine cats, and Jaggedtail was inclined to agree. Medicine cats were arguably the most important cats in Clan life, leader's led the Clan but medicine cats healed and guided leaders. *They deserve so much respect.* Jaggedtail thought proudly, and LichenClan was so lucky to have two wonderful medicine cats in Sagefeather and Stormsong.

"Sagefeather and Stormsong of LichenClan," Birdstar mewed.

"Eagleclaw and Moonpaw of AshClan." Ivyheart added.

"Skyclaw and Badgerpaw of MoonClan." Cloudstar held her head high.

"Feathernose and Honeypaw of SunClan." Foxstar's voice trembled with pride. "Without our medicine cats, the Clans wouldn't survive."

"I agree." Cloudstar dipped her head. "We should return to our homes, I pray to StarClan that all of your sick cats get healthier."

"I wish the same for all of you." Ivyheart added, jumping down from the trees. With the gathering coming to a close, Jaggedtail and his Clanmates stood up to leave. The gathering had gone smoothly, Cloudstar didn't try and start a fight and the Clans mourned the deaths of cats taken from sickness and honored the cats who tried so hard to save them. *This is how the Clans should be.* Jaggedtail thought. *Peace and respect.*

Chapter 17

For the first time in moons, Jaggedtail could hear birds in the trees. The air had a chill to it, but it wasn't cold enough to keep the snow around. The snow had melted, leaving room for the forest to regrow stronger than before. Prey was beginning to return and the medicine cat den was empty except for Sagefeather and Stormsong. Newleaf had finally arrived and the cats of LichenClan rejoiced.

Jaggedtail was glad to finally hunt without the struggle of trying to hide his ginger pelt against the stark white snow, he could finally return to creeping through LichenClan's thick territory. It would be a moon or so before the forest was back at its original glory, filled completely with thick brush and dense forestry, Jaggedtail couldn't wait for it. For now, however, he would enjoy the fact that leaf-bare was over.

All the cats had recovered from their sickness and were back on warrior duties as if nothing had ever happened. In the moon since they were apprenticed, Applepaw and Cherrypaw were working incredibly hard for their Clan. Cherrypaw's mentor, Daisyfern, however, had moved to the nursery expecting Breezefall's kits. Her mentor for probably the remainder of her apprenticeship was now Mothflame.

Jaggedtail was incredibly excited for new kits to join the Clan. They always brought hope and strength to the Clan. Most of LichenClan was excited for Daisyfern's kits, Breezefall had been boasting about them since Daisyfern announced that she was expecting. At the time, Jaggedtail had found himself wondering what it was like to be a father. Breezefall seemed to be incredibly excited as did Daisyfern. *I've only been a warrior for two moons.* Jaggedtail reminded himself. *I don't need to worry about mates just yet.* He just wanted to focus on living a happy life now that the warm seasons had returned.

Jaggedtail had a strong feeling that Daisyfern wouldn't be the only new member of the nursery. He had noticed that some cats had

started growing incredibly close to one another, he especially noticed Vinetail and Fieldfoot and Poppywing and Sparrowheart. It was only a matter of time before those queens moved into the nursery alongside Daisyfern. In just a few short moons, Amberflame's kits would be ready to be apprenticed as well.

Jaggedtail couldn't help but want to mentor one of her kits. *They're both so full of energy.* Jaggedtail thought. *Plus they're Hareclaw's kits, I would love to mentor them just as good as he mentored me.* "Hey, Jaggedtail!" Jaggedtail's ears twitched as he heard a voice call his name. He looked towards the warriors' den where he saw Elmheart and Maplepool padding up to him.

"What's up?" Jaggedtail turned to face them as they reached where he had been standing.

"We're going hunting, want to join us?" Maplepool questioned cheerfully.

"Of course." Jaggedtail purred, looking over his sister and his friend. "Where are we going?"

"Probably towards the MoonClan border, Jumpheart sent the earlier patrol to the other side of the territory so we will probably have more luck there." Elmheart explained. Jaggedtail agreed and the three warriors set out into the forest.

Things had been relatively peaceful with MoonClan lately, they hadn't challenged the borders or stolen any prey. Jaggedtail hoped that with Cloudstar as their new leader she would end this fight between the two Clans. *It's been so long since Blacksky was killed.* Jaggedtail looked at Elmheart, remembering the day when Elmheart had killed the MoonClan warrior. He had looked so horrified and scared, but he owned up to it. He endured his punishment and in the end he came out an amazing warrior. *Elmheart isn't the apprentice he used to be, he's a powerful, loyal and strong warrior.* Jaggedtail felt a rush of pride for his best friend, he knew that Elmheart was so much better now, he just wished MoonClan would see him the same way.

The three warriors trekked through the forest, as the day continued

the air grew warmer and Jaggedtail breathed in the fresh air of newleaf. They reached their desired hunting spot and split up to find their own pieces of prey. Jaggedtail lowered his body to the forest floor, creeping through the undergrowth and scenting for prey. He quickly caught the scent of squirrel and began hunting it down.

He spotted his prey, nibbling on a seed at the base of a large oak tree. Jaggedtail hid himself from view of the squirrel, it was fat and very large. *Perfect.* Jaggedtail thought. He unsheathed his claws and slowly moved forward, keeping his pawsteps silent. Once he had the perfect chance to attack he took it. Jaggedtail charged forward and before the squirrel could even react he pinned it to the ground and killed with a clean bite to the neck. He felt a rush of energy from his hunt and he couldn't wait to continue.

Jaggedtail buried his squirrel and continued his hunt. He crept closer to the river, sniffing for prey but an unexpected scent rushed into his nose. *MoonClan.* Jaggedtail's fur stood on end. *I can't be that close to the border, can I?* Jaggedtail lifted his head, he was near the river but MoonClan's scent shouldn't reach this far. Jaggedtail spotted the dark red-brown pelt of Elmheart about a foxlength away, he had caught the scent as well.

Jaggedtail moved silently through the forest to reach Elmheart, if this was an invasion then he had to make sure to not give away where he was. He reached Elmheart and saw that Maplepool was with him as well. Maplepool spotted Jaggedtail and beckoned him forward. "You smell that too?" She questioned, her voice in a whisper.

Jaggedtail nodded. "Yeah, they've been here recently."

"We need to find if they stole any prey." Elmheart commanded, Jaggedtail and Maplepool agreed and the three warriors began searching for any signs of prey. Jaggedtail moved closer to the river border to the Spirit Woods when he heard voices. He stopped dead in his tracks and listened to see who they belonged to.

"Are you sure we should be here?" A soft voice asked. "Seems like Cloudstar just wants us to start a fight?" Jaggedtail's fur stood on

end. *They're on our territory!*

"That's because Cloudstar *does* want us to start a fight." Another voice spoke, one Jaggedtail recognized as Breezeclaw. He moved forward silently to get a look at how many cats were in their territory. Through the trees he managed to see Breezeclaw, Icestorm and Ashbird. At their paws was a dead mouse, Jaggedtail unsheathed his claws. He looked around for Maplepool and Elmheart, he spotted his sister and beckoned with his head for her to come to him.

She whispered something to Elmheart who Jaggedtail couldn't see and they crept over to join Jaggedtail. Upon seeing them, Elmheart dug his claws into the earth. "*Thieves.*" He hissed quietly.

"There's only three of them." Maplepool mewed, her green eyes burning with anger. "Let's show them what happens when they steal prey from us."

Jaggedtail nodded, these MoonClan cats had to be taught a lesson. He looked at Elmheart who was waiting for something. "Go when I give the signal." He whispered. There was a long moment of silence and Jaggedtail kept his gaze focused on Elmheart. At last, Elmheart waved his tail and all three cats exploded out of the undergrowth.

Jaggedtail collided with Ashbird, the warrior letting out a cry of alarm. He raked his claws down her pelt and bit down onto her shoulder. Ashbird hissed in pain and as she finally reacted, she lashed out at Jaggedtail, her claws ripping into his chest. Jaggedtail tightened his grip on Ashbird's shoulder and tossed her to the side. She rolled through the leaves but quickly got back up.

"Thief!" Jaggedtail spat before running at the MoonClan warrior again. He jumped onto her back and his larger weight quickly made her drop to the ground. Jaggedtail landed on his paws and spun around, lashing out with his forepaw. His claws caught the tip of Ashbird's ear and made a large cut in them. She hissed in pain and backed off.

"Breezeclaw! Icestorm!" She called. "Let's leave! This isn't worth it!" Leaving their mouse behind, the three warriors ran for their own

border.

"And don't come back!" Elmheart shouted after the warriors, they soon vanished into their territory and Jaggedtail looked over Elmheart and Maplepool, neither of them seemed to be horribly injured. Maplepool had a small scratch under her eye but other than that they were all relatively unharmed.

"So Cloudstar clearly hasn't given up on us." Maplepool growled. "How long will they hold this grudge for?"

"Apparently forever." Elmheart snarled, his claws ripping into the ground. "Come on," He began turning around and heading back to LichenClan camp. "We need to tell Birdstar about this."

They all agreed and started walking back to camp, Jaggedtail managed to pick up the squirrel he had caught and was slightly upset that they hadn't caught more. Maplepool, however, did bring back the mouse that MoonClan had caught. Despite not hunting, they did manage to drive MoonClan cats off their territory, which was more important.

They reached the camp and headed straight for Birdstar's den, outside Jumpheart was sharing prey with Mothflame. They both looked at the three warriors in confusion, their pelts were rustled and they had a few small scratches across their bodies. "What happened?"

"We caught some MoonClan cats hunting on our land." Elmheart explained, both Jumpheart and Mothflame's eyes widened. "We chased them off but we need to tell Birdstar."

"Go right ahead." Jumpheart got out of the way so that Jaggedtail, Elmheart and Maplepool could climb up into the leader's den. It was an easy climb, despite Jaggedtail's hatred of climbing trees. They reached the den and Jaggedtail was surprised at how large it was. Inside, Birdstar was washing her pelt with the remains of prey at her paws. She looked up when she saw the three warriors.

"Is everything okay? You three look like you've been in a fight." Birdstar pointed out.

"That's because we have." Elmheart answered. "We were out hunting when we found Ashbird, Breezeclaw and Icestorm of MoonClan hunting on our territory. We drove them out but we needed to tell you."

Birdstar sighed. "I swear," She growled. "How long can one Clan hold a grudge." She flicked her tail.

"When I heard them talking," Jaggedtail spoke up. "Breezeclaw said that Cloudstar is trying to start a fight. They want us to attack them."
Birdstar rolled her eyes. "Of course she is, she wants us to fight them so that we can look like the hostile Clan." She shook her head slowly. "Thank you for telling me about this, you three should either get checked up by Sagefeather and get some rest."

They left the large den and regrouped at the bottom. "You two look fine but I'm gonna get this scratch looked at." Maplepool told Jaggedtail and Elmheart. "Last thing I want is some infection."

"Alright, Maplepool." Jaggedtail told his sister. "Meet us by the warriors' den and we can get something to eat." Maplepool nodded and bounded off towards the medicine cat den. Jaggedtail turned to Elmheart who looked incredibly frustrated.

"You alright?" Jaggedtail questioned.

"No," Elmheart lashed his tail. "I'm not alright." He looked up towards the sky, the sun was starting to fall and sunset was upon them. "I made a mistake moons ago and MoonClan is still upset about it?" He looked at Jaggedtail with burning amber eyes. "I understand Crowpaw still hating me but the entire Clan? Something tells me that MoonClan isn't exactly that angry about Blacksky anymore. Maybe they just don't know when to quit. When Owlstar died Cloudstar could've put this entire thing in the past, but she refuses to."

Jaggedtail couldn't help but agree, warriors died in battles constantly but it wasn't worth starting a whole war over. A war that spanned moons and seasons, Cloudstar needed to drop it. "Maybe she doesn't know how to." Jaggedtail shrugged. "Honestly, I know it

sounds kind of stupid, but maybe a fight would be good. I think that Cloudstar needs to suffer a hard loss, I'm not necessarily talking about death, but she needs to see that constantly fighting with us isn't worth it."

Elmheart nodded. "Well," He looked down at his paws. "Something tells me that a battle will be here soon, and we need to be prepared to fight it."

Chapter 18

LichenClan arrived in the gathering hollow just before SunClan, making them the last to Clans to arrive. Jaggedtail walked beside Maplepool and Elmheart and took notice of the MoonClan cats, he couldn't see Icestorm and Breezeclaw but he spotted Ashbird sitting beside a black tom named Spidertail. Jaggedtail watched Birdstar and Jumpheart make their way to the trees, Birdstar was visibly annoyed. *She's finally making our feud with MoonClan public.* Jaggedtail flicked his ears. *I wonder what the other Clans will think.*

Once all the leaders were ready to begin, the gathering began. Foxstar was the first one to speak. "I'd like to start this gathering if the rest of you don't mind." The SunClan leader looked incredibly eager to get the gathering started. *What kind of news does SunClan have?*

None of the other leaders argued and Foxstar stood up to share his news. "SunClan welcomes a bunch of new warriors to this gathering. Stormwind, Slateclaw, Cloudstorm, Flowerpelt, Thornpelt, Tigertail, Bramblepelt, Crowfur and Rainears!" Jaggedtail was surprised at so many new warriors. *Do they have any apprentices left?* Jaggedtail wondered, but cheered along with the rest of the Clans. He couldn't pick out all the new warriors but they all seemed proud. "Our warriors den is crowded but we couldn't be happier."

"That's wonderful news." Goldenstar purred, now fully recovered from her illness. "Mind if I go next?" Foxstar nodded and sat down, allowing the AshClan leader to continue. "AshClan also has two new warriors, please welcome Lilyclaw and Graypelt!" Jaggedtail spotted the two warriors, Lilyclaw looked bashful but proud while Graypelt held his head high. "Our medicine cat apprentice has also received her full medicine cat name, Moonwhisker!"

Next was Cloudstar, leaving Birdstar to be the last to speak. "MoonClan also has two new warriors to announce, welcome Frostfire and Icestorm!" Jaggedtail finally spotted Icestorm sitting

beside Frostfire, she had been one of the cats who invaded. Though she had been the one questioning the whole situation. That was the end of Cloudstar's news and the white and gray leader sat down, it was finally Birdstar's turn. Jaggedtail braced himself for the argument that was about to take place.

"LichenClan doesn't have any warriors to announce, but we do welcome two new apprentices, Cherrypaw and Applepaw!" Birdstar announced proudly and once the cheers died down, Birdstar continued. "However," She mewed sharply. "I've tried my best to keep this between us, but Cloudstar has pushed my borders for the last time." Jaggedtail could see Cloudstar and Ivystone tense up, as well as the rest of the MoonClan cats.

"For the past several moons Cloudstar has been crossing our borders, stealing prey and even invaded our camp!" The cats of SunClan and AshClan seemed uncomfortable with the argument, some muttered under their breaths and some looked completely shocked.

"I'm simply following orders that Owlstar gave before he died." Cloudstar flicked her ears, Jaggedtail felt annoyance burning in his chest. *I want to claw that smug look right off her face!* "You killed our warrior so you must pay." Beside Jaggedtail, he felt Elmheart tense. Many MoonClan warriors glared directly at him, Jaggedtail sat tall beside his friend.

"That was moons ago, Cloudstar!" Birdstar spat. "Honestly, I know we never forget our dead but you can't blame LichenClan forever. You tried stealing our herbs, that would've killed many of our cats!"

Cloudstar snorted. "I was taught that when a cat makes a mistake, that cat must be punished."

Birdstar bristled. "You blame the action of one of my warriors, I punished him! Move on!"

"You shouldn't have even made him a warrior!" Cloudstar hissed, claws digging into her branch. Elmheart let out a low growl, his claws ripping into the grass beneath his paws. Maplepool rested her tail across Elmheart's shoulders and that seemed to relax him

slightly. *Cloudstar is mad.* Jaggedtail thought. *They need to let it go.*

Surprisingly, Goldenstar spoke up from her own tree. She stood up and got the attention of the other leaders. "I have to agree with Birdstar," Cloudstar's eyes went wide with fury. "You can't blame LichenClan forever, all cats in this hollow know that any battle could be their last. We all took that oath when we became warriors. That we will defend the Clans, even at the cost of our lives." Cloudstar hissed at the AshClan leader who was clearly unphased. "The loss of a warrior is tragic but you can't hold grudges forever, and it doesn't give you an excuse to break the warrior code. You're no better than an apprentice throwing a fit, Cloudstar."

Jaggedtail had to withhold laughter at Goldenstar's comment, maybe if the other leaders thought she was acting like an idiot then she would finally stop. Cloudstar, however, was very upset. Her white and gray pelt bristled and her claws ripped at the bark on her branch. "We're leaving!" Cloudstar hissed and jumped down from her branch with a lash of her tail. Without another word, Cloudstar led her Clan home.

Jaggedtail looked back at Birdstar, she looked slightly guilty, probably for causing a scene, but every cat in LichenClan knew that it needed to be said. "I'm sorry I had to bring that up." Birdstar apologized to the other leaders. "But I can't take it anymore, the Clans need to know what MoonClan is doing."

It's okay, Birdstar." Foxstar dipped his head. "I just hope that you two can come to some sort of an agreement before more blood is shed." Jaggedtail wasn't sure that was possible.

"Me too." Birdstar sighed and shook her head. "I suppose I should take my Clan home, may StarClan light your paths." She dipped her head and jumped down from her tree. Jaggedtail followed his Clan home, he could tell that Elmheart was still very upset by what Cloudstar had said.

"Can you believe her?" Elmheart spat. "Telling me I shouldn't be a warrior?" He lashed his tail. "She better hope that no LichenClan cat dies in her stupid little feud."

"She's delusional." Maplepool snorted. "I wonder if the rest of MoonClan agrees with everything she's doing. If Birdstar was doing something like this then I don't know if I would be able to follow her, my leader or not."

"When I found those three on our territory Icestorm seemed uncertain of what they were doing. Like she didn't want any part of it." Jaggedtail explained.

"Aren't Icestorm and Frostfire Owlstar's daughters? I'm pretty sure anyway." Maplepool questioned. "But I did kind of notice something weird."

"What?" Jaggedtail questioned.

"I haven't seen or heard anything about Crowpaw since Blacksky's death." Elmheart tensed. "He's not that much younger than us, he should've been made a warrior by now. They never announced his death if he did die. I haven't even *seen* him at a gathering."

Jaggedtail had been wondering the same thing, he thought Crowpaw was nice but it seemed like the apprentice vanished without a word. *I wonder what happened to him.* Jaggedtail could only imagine how upset Crowpaw was with Blacksky's death, Jaggedtail wasn't sure how he would handle losing his own father, but what happened to him?

Elmheart sighed loudly. "I don't want to talk about it anymore." His amber eyes stared ahead, burning with anger. Jaggedtail and Maplepool exchanged a worried look. *Elmheart is very upset, but I don't think there's anything I can do right now.* He thought sadly.

LichenClan reached their camp and Elmheart's mood hadn't improved, Jaggedtail was very worried about his friend. "What should we do?" Jaggedtail questioned his sister quietly so Elmheart couldn't hear.

"Let me try and talk to him." Maplepool mewed and approached Elmheart without Jaggedtail. He looked at her and Jaggedtail could see the obvious pain in his eyes. *Despite what he claims, Elmheart is still guilty over Blacksky's death.* Jaggedtail wished he could've seen it

sooner, so he could try and help Elmheart. *It doesn't help that Cloudstar won't let it go.*

"Come talk with me." Maplepool said in a soft voice to Elmheart, Elmheart looked at Jaggedtail for a moment before following Maplepool out of camp. Jaggedtail wished he could be there too, but he was certain that his sister would be able to help. There was something off about the way Maplepool and Elmheart looked at each other, however, he just couldn't name it. *It doesn't matter.* Jaggedtail told himself, moving to the warrior's den to get some sleep. *What matters is that Elmheart is happy and I hope Maplepool can help with that.*

Chapter 19

LichenClan continued to thrive in the season of newleaf. Prey was bountiful, the forest growing back and their warriors were as strong as ever. It had been just over a moon since Birdstar had told the Clans about Cloudstar's attacks on LichenClan and MoonClan had been uncomfortably quiet, Jaggedtail hoped that perhaps Cloudstar had finally stopped but deep down he knew that was far from the truth.

Despite his growing fear of MoonClan, Jaggedtail found himself focusing on how well LichenClan was doing, they continued to grow and thrive. Daisyfern had given birth to two kits just a few days ago, a she-cat named Willowkit and a tom named Timberkit. They were still very young and did pretty much nothing but sleep. They also weren't the only new members of the nursery, just as Jaggedtail had suspected both Vinetail and Poppywing had moved into the nursery expecting kits.

It wouldn't be long until LichenClan was full of new life, stronger than ever. Jaggedtail couldn't wait for more kits to be born, they always gave so much hope and happiness.

Jaggedtail left the warrior's den in hopes of getting on a patrol but he was stopped by Jumpheart. "Excuse me, Jaggedtail." Jaggedtail stopped walking and faced his deputy.

"Hi, Jumpheart." He greeted with a nod. "What do you need?"

"I need you and your sister. Well Birdstar does, actually." Jumpheart explained.

"I think she's still in the warrior's den." Jaggedtail recalled seeing his sister sleeping as he left. "I can go wake her though."

"Please do." Jaggedtail turned back to the den, he was confused on what Birdstar needed from them but he would do what he was asked. The den was nearly empty with the exception of a few

warriors including Maplepool. Jaggedtail moved through the den until he reached his sister. He prodded her gently with his paw until she opened her eyes, which were incredibly groggy.

"Wha-?" Maplepool let out a heavy yawn and stretched out her forelegs. "What do you want?" She asked, slowly blinking.

"Birdstar wants to talk to us." Jaggedtail answered. His explanation seemed to wake Maplepool up more, her eyes opened fully and she lifted her head.

"What about?"

"Not sure." Jaggedtail shrugged. "Jumpheart just said that Birdstar asked to talk to us."

Maplepool yawned once again and rose from her nest, shaking loose moss from her pelt. "Alright then. Let's go talk to her." Jaggedtail and Maplepool walked out of the den where Jumpheart was waiting.

"Excellent." Jumpheart mewed. "Let's go." Jumpheart led Maplepool and Jaggedtail the leader's den where they climbed up into the den.

Upon seeing them Birdstar greeted the two siblings kindly. "Ah! Welcome you two." She purred.

Jaggedtail and Maplepool sat down in front of the den's entrance while Jumpheart sat down beside Birdstar. "What's this about?" Jaggedtail questioned.

"Well," Birdstar began. "If you're not aware, Foxkit and Flamekit have turned six moons old and are ready to become apprentices." Jaggedtail's eyes widened slightly. *Are we really getting apprentices?* "And I wanted the two of you to mentor them." Jaggedtail and Maplepool shared an eager glance.

"Really?" Maplepool checked. "We haven't been warriors for very long."

"I know." Birdstar gave a small nod. "But I chose mentors based on how well I think they will work the apprentice, not because of age

or time as warrior. I personally believe that Jaggedtail will be a perfect mentor to Foxkit and Maplepool will be perfect for Flamekit."

"I would be honored to mentor Foxkit." Jaggedtail spoke up, trying to contain the excitement within him. *Birdstar believes I am mature enough to mentor an apprentice, I have to act like it!*

"And I would be more than happy to mentor Flamekit." Maplepool appeared to be trying just as hard as Jaggedtail to look composed.

"Then let's hold the ceremony!" Birdstar stood up with pride brimming in her amber eyes. Jaggedtail felt a surge of pride in his leader, Birdstar was old but she still had so much life in her eyes and body. The four cats left the leader's den and moved to the High Stump.

More of LichenClan had woken up and Jaggedtail spotted Elmheart returning from the dawn patrol, he met Jaggedtail's gaze then shifted it to Birdstar, looking somewhat confused. Jaggedtail beckoned his friend over with his tail and Elmheart sat down beside Jaggedtail. "What's going on?" He questioned.

"You'll see." Jaggedtail puffed his chest out.

"Let all cats old enough to catch their own prey gather around the High Stump for a Clan meeting!" Birdstar called, getting the attention of LichenClan. Jaggedtail looked over at the nursery where Flamekit and Foxkit bursted out into the camp, Flamekit walked with more composure but Foxkit's fur was puffed out and his eyes burning with excitement. Jaggedtail light out a purr. *That cat is going to be my apprentice.* He thought proudly.

"Oh," Elmheart realized. "It's Foxkit and Flamekit's apprentice ceremony. I wonder who their mentors are going to be." Jaggedtail and Maplepool exchanged a cheeky glance to each other, confusing Elmheart.

Amberflame ran out after her kits and pinned Foxkit to the ground to groom his ginger fur, he complained and squirmed but Amberflame got her way. She ler her kits go and both sprinted

across the clearing, making their way through the crowd and skidding to a stop in the center.

Amberflame sat down beside Hareclaw, the two nuzzled each other lovingly then looked on to watch their kits.

"I've called this meeting today because Foxkit and Flamekit have reached the age of six moons and are ready to start their journey to becoming warriors!" Foxkit and Flamekit held their heads high. "Flamekit, from this day forward until you have earned your warrior name you will be known as Flamepaw. The mentor I've chosen for you is Maplepool, she is a kind yet fierce and skilled warrior and I know she will pass those skills onto you."

Elmheart's eyes widened as Maplepool stood up and crossed the crowd to her new apprentice where they touched noses. Elmheart looked at Jaggedtail and mouthed the words "You too?"

Jaggedtail nodded and he saw pride flood into Elmheart's eyes. *I wish Elmheart could mentor an apprentice, but his time will come soon. We're about to have a nursery full of kits.*

Once Maplepool and Flamepaw stepped to the side, Birdstar continued. "Foxkit, from this day forward until you have earned your warrior name you will be known as Foxpaw. I've chosen Jaggedtail as your mentor, he was mentored by your father and I know that his teachings will be passed on to you as well."

Jaggedtail stood up and approached his new apprentice, amber eyes burning with fierce excitement. *This apprentice is counting on me.* Jaggedtail thought. *I won't light him down.* Jaggedtail touched his nose to Foxpaw's and they stepped off to the side.

"Flamepaw! Foxpaw! Flamepaw! Foxpaw!" LichenClan cheered their newest apprentices and then returned to their duties as planned. Once the crowd had dissipated, Foxpaw began bouncing in circles around Jaggedtail. "What are we doing first?" He asked eagerly.

"Well," Jaggedtail thought, looking at Maplepool. Flamepaw was much more calm than her brother. "I was thinking we did what your father did with me, we take you on a tour of the territory."

"Awesome!" Foxpaw exclaimed. "Is Flamepaw coming too?"

"I don't see why not." Maplepool purred.

"I was hoping you would become the mentor to one of my kits." Jaggedtail heard Hareclaw speak from behind him, he turned to face his former mentor. "Foxpaw you better behave for him."

"I think I can handle him." Jaggedtail mewed. "It's more of a challenge that way."

Hareclaw purred. "I don't want you to teach him the way I taught you, I want you to teach him better than I taught you. That is your job as a mentor, to take the skills you learned from your own mentor and improve upon them. That is how warriors evolve, and someday when Foxpaw is a warrior he will pass what he learned onto the rest of his Clanmates, including myself."

For a moment Jaggedtail missed when he was Hareclaw's apprentice, he was so wise and taught him so much. *Now it's my turn to teach his son. I won't let him down.*

Chapter 20

Jaggedtail crossed LichenClan camp towards the apprentice den, he had an long and early day of hunting and training planned for Foxpaw and they needed to start right away. He poked his head into the den all four occupants were sleeping soundly in their nests including Foxpaw. Careful not to wake the others, Jaggedtail lightly poked Foxpaw in the side.

The apprentice shifted in his nest, letting out a quiet grumble. Jaggedtail repeated his pokes and Foxpaw finally opened his groggy eyes. "Wha?" He muttered, clearly not fully awake yet. "Jaggedtail?"

"It's time for us to go out and train." Jaggedtail explained. The idea of training seemed to awaken Foxpaw more, he stood up and stretched out in his nest. "I'll let you wake up, come meet me by the High Stump when you're ready." Jaggedtail turned out of the apprentice den and moved to the High Stump where he sat down to wait for his apprentice.

It had been a moon since Foxpaw and Flamepaw were made apprentices and it had been one of the best moons of Jaggedtail's life. He loved training Foxpaw, the apprentice was excitable and eager to learn. He wasn't the fastest learner but he listened to every word that Jaggedtail said and if he practiced enough, he would learn the skill swiftly. He also loved training alongside Maplepool, though he wished Elmheart was a mentor with them. He knew that Daisyfern's kits wouldn't be apprenticed for another four moons, Jaggedtail hoped that one of them would be given to Elmheart, though Foxpaw would have been an apprentice for five. *Still. Elmheart deserves an apprentice.*

It didn't take long for Foxpaw to appear from the apprentice den, his fluffy tail high and his pawsteps confident. Jaggedtail stood up and faced his apprentice. "Are you ready?" Jaggedtail questioned.

"Of course." Foxpaw boasted.

"Then let's head out." Taking the lead, Jaggedtail led Foxpaw out of the back of camp, behind the apprentice den.

"Where are we going?" Foxpaw questioned, looking around the forest with curious amber eyes.

"Towards the twolegplace. We don't hunt around this area a lot because prey doesn't usually come this way." Jaggedtail explained. "Hunting in a place with scarce prey is good practice for when the entire forest becomes like this in leaf-bare. You need to be prepared to hunt in a season like that."

"Leaf-bare just ended though." Foxpaw retorted. "It's so far away now."

"It will come quicker than you think." Jaggedtail explained. "And you need to be prepared, it is a very hard season. Warriors must hunt to keep their Clanmates fed while the medicine cats take care of the sick."

Foxpaw didn't respond, but he seemed to be understanding why it was so important. Jaggedtail led him near the border of the twolegplace, separated by a sharp, wall of unknown tendrils. They were stronger than any brambles and incredibly sharp. Jaggedtail remember hearing nursery stories of a former LichenClan leader named Sweetstar who lost her leg by getting trapped in the mesh. Jaggedtail made sure to keep his and Foxpaw's distance from the thing.

"When hunting in leaf-bare you need to be extra careful, because one piece of prey could be the difference between life and death for some cats. There may even be days that you go hungry because kits and elders need to eat before we do." Foxpaw nodded. "You need to be extra careful, and you will soon learn that having dark ginger pelts makes hunting against white snow even harder. There's not much we can do about it except perfect our hunting techniques."
"Do you remember how I taught you to hunt mice?" Jaggedtail quizzed.

"Stay light on your paws, because a mouse can feel vibrations in the ground before they ever see or even smell you." Foxpaw recited the

information with ease.

"What about squirrels?"

"Speed is everything, you have to be fast because the squirrel can quickly get into a tree and get away." Foxpaw was clearly confident in his answers.

"Good." Jaggedtail praised with a purr. "You've retained the information, but let's see if you can follow it. Go out and hunt and when you come back I want you to have at least one mouse and one squirrel, I'll be hunting myself so you'll have to find me." Foxpaw have a quick nod and ran off into the trees, tail held high.

Jaggedtail felt a rush of pride, Foxpaw was so eager all the time. He had lost a little bit of his hyperactive attitude during his training but he had so much energy to spare, Jaggedtail hoped he never lost that energy, it would serve him well. Jaggedtail ventured forth on his own hunt, nearing the twolegplace confidently.

He was about to catch a mouse when he heard movement, and a strange scent filled his nose. *There's a stranger on our territory.* Jaggedtail crept forward, making out a large figure in the distance, he hid himself behind some brush.

Jaggedtail narrowed his eyes, peering through the brush at the figure. It was a plump, dark brown tom. *A kittypet?* Jaggedtail wondered, kittypets hardly ever strayed this far beyond their homes. Jaggedtail watched the kittypet for a few moments, waiting to see what it would do. How brave could a kittypet be? Would he stray further into LichenClan territory or would he turn back to his twolegs.

The kittypet turned his head in Jaggedtail's direction, making Jaggedtail's blood turn to ice. The dark amber eyes were hauntingly familiar, but the kittypet had two deep nicks in one of its ears, a scar that Jaggedtail had only seen in one other cat. *Rowanfang.*

Unable to take anymore, Jaggedtail stood up and stepped into Rowanfang's view. "What are you doing here?" He demanded, causing Rowanfang to freeze up. This wasn't the Rowanfang that

Jaggedtail remembered. Rowanfang had been a strong, muscular warrior with the fire of battle in his eyes.

This Rowanfang was plump with soft, glossy fur and dimmed amber eyes. Around his neck was a strange, black tendril that had a tiny, shiny ball on the end that jingled when he moved. *He turned his back on LichenClan to become a kittypet.* Jaggedtail bared his teeth. "Get off my territory, Rowanfang." He spat. "You don't belong here anymore."

Rowanfang narrowed his eyes, as if he was having trouble recognizing Jaggedtail. *When he left I was just an apprentice.* Then Rowanfang rested his eyes on Jaggedtail's broken tail. "Jaggedpaw?"

"It's Jagged*tail.*" He growled. "You need to leave, *now.*"

Rowanfang snorted. "Give me a break." He swayed his tail. "I was one of LichenClan's best fighters, I'd like to see you make me."

So be it. Jaggedtail let out a yowl and charged forward, Rowanfang clearly hadn't been expecting him to actually attack because he was knocked over easily. Jaggedtail clawed at Rowanfang's shoulders and flanks, and the kittypet hadn't landed a single blow on Jaggedtail yet.

When Rowanfang finally got his claws out, his attacks were sloppy and clumsy. He was quickly getting out a breath. *I doubt this cat has fought since he left!* Jaggedtail thought. He pinned Rowanfang's dominate leg and sank his teeth into his scruff, Rowanfang weighed a lot more than an average warrior but Jaggedtail managed to toss him to the side. "You're out of practice, Rowanfang."

Rowanfang bared his teeth, but didn't say anything, Jaggedtail slowly shook his head. "You're a pathetic waste of a warrior." Jaggedtail's claws dug into the earth beneath his paws. He was never this hostile, but all he could picture was the sight of hurt and betrayal in Elmheart's eyes when they were just apprentices and Rowanfang turned his back on his only living kit.

"What do you know about being a real warrior?" Rowanfang demanded with a lash of his tail.

"I know that being a warrior requires loyalty to your Clan, to the cats around you. Dedicating yourself to your entire Clan, no matter what. It means supporting your Clan through all the hard times, holding them up with they're injured and hunting for them when they're sick. You did none of those things, you turned your back on the Clan when things got tough and hid as a kittypet.

"You turned your back on the cats who loved you and left them behind. You never really cared that Elmheart killed Blacksky did you?" Rowanfang flattened his ears. "You were searching for, *desperate* for any reason to hate him, any reason to run away and you found it. But it cost you everything, didn't it?"

"I don't need to listen to the ramblings of a kit." Rowanfang spat. "You don't think anything, Jaggedtail. Stop acting all high and mighty." Rowanfang turned away.

"Don't *ever* step foot into this territory again." Jaggedtail threatened. "You gave up your life, leave it behind and let Elmheart live without you."

Rowanfang hissed one last time before sprinting back towards the twolegplace. Jaggedtail let out a low sigh, praying that this would be the last time he ever saw Rowanfang.

"Jaggedtail?" A small, scared voice spoke from the shadows. Jaggedtail looked over his shoulder to see Foxpaw, the apprentice looked slightly shaken and very confused. "Who was that?"

Jaggedtail sighed again. "Don't worry about it, Foxpaw. It was just a kittypet. We should get home, I need to report this."

Jaggedtail and Foxpaw returned home, but Jaggedtail wasn't reporting what he saw to Birdstar straight away, there were two cats who needed to know more. The entire walk home, Jaggedtail debated telling Elmheart, but he knew that his friend needed to know. *I don't know what he will do.* Jaggedtail thought. *But I will be there to support him.* Jaggedtail spotted Elmheart sharing prey with Maplepool and he approahced them slowly.

Maplepool noticed Jaggedtail first, as well as his ruffled fur from

the fight. "What happened to you?"

"A small fight." Jaggedtail explained briefly. "Elmheart, I need to talk to you. It's very important." Elmheart's gaze turned serious and he stood up. "Have you seen Mosswing around?"

"Pretty sure she's near the warrior's den with Fawnsky." Elmheart replied. "What's this about?"

"Just follow me." With Maplepool and Elmheart in tow, Jaggedtail padded over to the warrior's den where sure enough, he found Fawnsky and Maplepool. *Fawnsky can know too.* Jaggedtail thought. *We're all like a family.*

"Hey there you three." Mosswing greeted with a purr. "What are you up to?"

"And Jaggedtail," Fawnsky spoke up. "I thought you grew out of your messy fur days." She scoffed playfully.

"Mosswing, I need to tell you and Elmheart something." Jaggedtail explained, ignoring his mother's comment.

Mosswing looked at Elmheart who was clearly just as confused as she was. "Alright then. Spit it out." Elmheart and Maplepool sat down beside their mothers and Jaggedtail took a deep breath.

"I took Foxpaw out training by the twolegplace and I saw a kittypet. I thought it was just a random kittypet but then I got a closer look. It was Rowanfang."

Elmheart's ears flattened and Mosswing's eyes widened slightly. "*Rowanfang?*" In the twolegplace? What was he doing there?"

"He's a kittypet now, I don't know what he was doing on our territory but I attacked him. He has almost none of his skills as a warrior left so he didn't really hurt me at all." Jaggedtail continued. "I told him to never come back, but I thought the two of you should know."

Mosswing stared at her paws. "When we were younger, Rowanfang was such a fierce warrior. I never even imagined him living as a

kittypet of all things. A rogue or loner, sure, but a kittypet?" She shook her head. "I guess I never really knew him at all."

"He's a *coward.*" Elmheart growled, his claws tearing at the dirt. "He ran away to live a safe, sheltered life. The Clan is better off without him."

"I'm sorry, Elmheart." Jaggedtail lowered his head.

"It's not your fault, Jaggedtail." Elmheart stood up. "I'm glad you told me." He casted his amber eyes up towards the clear sky. "Rowanfang is nothing to me, he's not my father and he's not my Clanmates. He's a nameless, weak kittypet. He ruined everything but I won't. I'm going to be loyal, strong and brave, everything he wasn't and when I have my own kits, I'll be the father he couldn't even dream of being."

There was a fierce burn of pride and passion in Elmheart's eyes, Jaggedtail couldn't help but feel it spread to his own mind. *Elmheart is nothing like Rowanfang. He will be so much better.*

Mosswing stood up as well, resting her tail across Elmheart's shoulders. "We never needed him." She purred, Elmheart closed his eyes and touched his muzzle to his mother's head. He was no longer a small, helpless kit. He was big, bold and brave.

"You have us." Fawnsky stepped forward. "You always will."

Jaggedtail felt warmth spreading throughout his entire body as he looked at his family. *Nothing can tear us apart.*

Chapter 21

Jaggedtail walked close beside Foxpaw, the apprentice was eager as always to be out in the forest. With every passing day he improved, finding new ways to impress Jaggedtail. He hunted with skill and practiced his battle skills with confidence and never stopped until he mastered what he was trying to learn.

Jaggedtail couldn't help but look at his apprentice with pride, he was so strong and would prove to be an incredible warrior when the time came. *I love training him, but I can't wait until he is finally a full warrior. He will make me so proud.* Jaggedtail kept a close eye on Foxpaw, his amber eyes scanned the forest as the patrol moved through the undergrowth. He was keeping a close eye on everything around him, just as every cat should while on patrol.

"Think MoonClan has been acting up at all?" Sparrowheart questioned Ashstream from the head of the patrol.

"I'm not sure." Ashstream shrugged. "If they're planning something then they haven't been showing it. Though I'm sure they are."

"Why doesn't MoonClan like us?" Applepaw questioned, stepping up to walk beside Sparrowheart. "I was never given a clear answer."

"There was a border skirmish moons ago and the MoonClan warrior Blacksky was killed. They've hated us ever since, Owlstar refused to let it go and now Cloudstar is continuing his fight." Sparrowheart explained, Jaggedtail noticed Mosswing wince slightly. *He didn't mention that it was Elmheart who killed Blacksky.* Jaggedtail thought. *I wonder why. It's not really a secret.*

"Will MoonClan ever forgive us for it?" Foxpaw asked.

"Dunno." Ashstream shrugged. "It's hard to say, maybe one day Cloudstar will realize that she's just cause more and more unnecessary bloodshed instead of letting the past go."

"She's so driven by pride." Mosswing chimed in. "Had it been any other leader after Owlstar I'm sure this whole feud would be over. Cloudstar is prideful, and clearly thinks the best course of action is to punish us for as long as she can, but who knows when she will finally give it up. I don't want any LichenClan *or* MoonClan cats to die because of her pride."

The patrol nodded in agreement. So far, Blacksky had been the only death between the two Clans but with how hard Cloudstar was pushing, Jaggedtail couldn't help but feel that more would eventually follow. *If Cloudstar causes the death of one of her own cats, what does that say about her being leader?* "Leaders are supposed to guide their Clans into a better future, not drive them into pointless battles because of the past." Jaggedtail added. "Cloudstar will have to realize this, and it may just cost her some warriors if she's not careful."

"I just hope that no LichenClan warriors are killed as well." Sparrowheart sighed. As the warriors spoke, Jaggedtail noticed something off about Applepaw. The she-cat came to a stop in her tracks, causing Mosswing to bump into her.

"Is everything okay, Applepaw?" Mosswing questioned.

"I dunno." Applepaw looked around, sniffing the air. "I smell something weird." Jaggedtail sniffed the air as well as a foul scent began to fill his nose. *How did I not notice this before.*

He noticed Sparrowheart's fur stand on end. "That's a--"

Before Sparrowheart could finish his sentence a bright, red creature burst out from the trees around them. Applepaw let out a shrill cry of alarm as she came face to face with a snarling fox. "Applepaw move!" Jaggedtail cried out but the apprentice was frozen in place.

The fox moved in a red blur, Applepaw finally responded to the situation but the fox was faster. It sank its teeth deep into Applepaw's hind leg and violently pulled her back. Her claws scraped the earth as she was picked up from the forest floor.

"Applepaw!" Sparrowheart cried out, running for his apprentice.

The rest of the patrol joined in. Jaggedtail unsheathed his claws and bared his teeth, racing to reach the fox and Applepaw.

The fox swung Applepaw around in its jaws, the apprentice could do nothing but flail in the air and cry in pain and fear. Sparrowheart reached the fox first, lashing at its muzzle with both forepaws. Jaggedtail saw fury blaze in the fox's eyes and it clamped down harder on Applepaw's leg, she cried louder, chilling Jaggedtail to the bone.

He jumped on the fox's back and slashed with all of his might, he noticed Mosswing, Ashstream and Foxpaw battering at its legs and belly. The fox refused to let go of Applepaw, however.

Ashstream twisted underneath the fox and lashed out at its throat, cutting deep into its neck. The fox yipped in pain and threw Applepaw, the apprentice flew helplessly through the air, her body slamming against a tree and falling to the ground with a heart wrenching thud. She didn't get back up.

Mosswing let out a cry of rage and clung onto the fox with all four paws, shredding its belly. The fox fell down, crushing Mosswing, Ashstream and Foxpaw underneath its weight and causing Jaggedtail to lose his balance and fall to the ground. All three cats wiggled out from underneath the fox which began to stand up again.

Sparrowheart sank his teeth into the fox's ears and Ashstream ran around to rake her claws down its haunches. The fox was bloodied and covered in wounds, but it continued to fight. It had a new target in its eyes, it went directly for Mosswing.

Jaggedtail slashed at its legs and paws, but the fox wasn't deterred. Mosswing let out a challenging yowl, Jaggedtail had never seen the she-cat with such ferocity. *She's a mother. She never wants anything to happen to the kits in her Clan.* Mosswing shredded the fox's nose, he stumbled backwards and howled in pain but charged forward. It knocked Sparrowheart and Ashstream to the side while it charged.

Jaggedtail ran to Mosswing's side, but was quickly pushed to the side. The fox pinned Mosswing to the ground with its huge paw, the

queen struggled underneath its powerful grip. Jaggedtail scrambled to his paws and leapt forward, landing on top of the fox's head, going straight for the creature's eyes.

Jaggedtail, however, wasn't fast enough. The fox moved straight forward, sinking its sharp teeth into Mosswing's throat, biting down with all its strength. Mosswing let out a cry of pain, only for it to be cut off by a choking gasp. Jaggedtail locked eyes with Mosswing, her green eyes filled with terror and pain. *No!* Jaggedtail clawed the fox's eyes with all of his energy and strength, it cried out in pain and let go of Mosswing, shaking his head and dropping Jaggedtail to the ground. Its eyes were bloody and torn, one of them completely shut by blood but it kept going.

Winded by the fall, Jaggedtail barely had time to react and dodge the fox's bite. He felt teeth bite down on his shoulder, the pain was overwhelming and completely darkened his vision. He yelled out in agony, blindly lashing out with his claws. He felt himself getting lifted off the ground, but not for long. He was dropped a short distance back to the forest floor as he heard yowls and cries of battle.

He squinted, trying to see through the horrible pain that filled his shoulder. He could a blur of the fight, he heard Sparrowheart let out a yowl of pain before he faded into blackness.

Jaggedtail opened his eyes, woken by the pain that still raged in his shoulder. He was barely able to focus on the world around him, he was still in the forest at the scene of the fight. Blood was sprayed across the forest floor and next to him was the unmoving, bloodied shape of Mosswing. *No.* He thought deliriously, trying to make sense of what had happened.

The fox was nowhere in sight, and Ashstream, Sparrowheart and Foxpaw still stood. Jaggedtail noticed Ashstream walking towards him. "Can you stand up?" She questioned, her voice muffled by the blood roaring in Jaggedtail's ears. He slowly nodded and attempted to stand up, he was unable to put any weight on his injured shoulder and nearly collapsed.

"Foxpaw, come help Jaggedtail walk." Ashstream called. *Is Foxpaw*

okay? Jaggedtail wondered, he could tell the apprentice had a limp but he couldn't see any serious injuries. Jaggedtail saw Sparrowheart picking Mosswing up and putting her body on his back while Ashstream retrieved Applepaw. *Is she dead?* Jaggedtail wondered, trying to focus but the pain pulling all of his attention.

Jaggedtail leaned against his apprentice, dragging his injured leg along the forest floor as they made the painful walk back to camp. Jaggedtail's mind was a torrent of pain and confusion. *Are they both dead?* Jaggedtail asked. *They can't be. I tried to save Mosswing.* The image of Mosswing's terror filled eyes flashed in Jaggedtail's mind, as well as Applepaw's cries as she was thrown around, both visions made him feel sick to his stomach.

They finally reached camp after what seemed like countless moons, Jaggedtail's vision had returned to normal but the first cat he rested his eyes on was Elmheart. *No.* Jaggedtail could see his amber eyes go wide with horror, and for a moment they were the only thing that Jaggedtail could see.

"Elmheart--" Even speaking brought Jaggedtail pain. He tried to stand up straight, no longer leaning on Foxpaw. He took a step forward, forgetting about his injury for a moment. Pain shot through his entire body like fire taking over his blood."Elmheart I tried--" The sudden burst of pain sent Jaggedtail falling to the floor, he blacked out before he hit the ground.

Jaggedtail's mouth was incredibly dry, and he felt a dull ache in his shoulder. His eyes felt stuck shut and his entire body was stiff. Jaggedtail forced his eyes to open and was met with the sharp scent of herbs. The light hurt his eyes, but they eventually focused and he realized he was in the medicine cat den. *What happened?* Jaggedtail's memory was fuzzy, but slowly images faded into his mind. *Applepaw. Mosswing.* Jaggedtail's heart twisted.

Jaggedtail slowly lifted his head, his neck stiff. Across the den stood Sagefeather, she heard the movement and looked over at Jaggedtail. "Good, you're awake." The old medicine cat mewed. "How do you feel?"

"Sore..." Jaggedtail's voice was weak and dry. "And thirsty."

Sagefeather brought over a ball of moss to Jaggedtail, he could see that it was soaking with water. Jaggedtail lapped up the water from the moss and it was the most refreshing water he had ever tasted. "Easy now." Sagefeather pulled the moss away. "Better?"

Jaggedtail nodded. "Yes, thank you." He looked over at his shoulder, remembering the fox biting into it. It was covered in a thick layer of cobweb and smelled strongly of herbs. "What happened to Applepaw and Mosswing? Are they okay?" Jaggedtail looked back at Sagefeather, her eyes darkened at the questioned, making Jaggedtail's heart forma knot.

"No." Sagefeather mewed sadly. "Mosswing was killed almost instantly from what I can tell, and Applepaw couldn't handle the trauma delt to her by the fox. She was barely alive when she reached camp and died before the night was over. Stormsong and I did everything that we could."

Jaggedtail looked at his paws, once again pictured Mosswing's and Applepaw's cries and fearful eyes. "I tried so hard to save Mosswing." Jaggedtail muttered, feeling pain spread through his entire body.

"And nearly got yourself killed as well." Sagefeather pointed out. "You have a nasty wound, I swear Elmheart and your family thought you were dead with the way you collapsed when you got back to camp."

"Elmheart..." Jaggedtail spoke louder, suddenly concerned for his friend. "How is Elmheart?"

"As good as you can be after losing your mother, he's been resting from the heartache. He's been worried sick about you as well, I will be sure to tell him and your family that you're up and talking, for now--" Sagefeather picked up a small bundle of flowers and placed them in front of Jaggedtail. "Eat this, it will help with the pain."

Sagefeather left the den and Jaggedtail ate the rest of the herb, it didn't take long before he heard the voices of Fawnsky, Sunstorm, Maplepool and Elmheart. "Calm down!" Sagefeather shouted over their voices. "Don't go making a mess of my den!"

Jaggedtail's family exploded into the medicine cat and quickly swarmed him, Fawnsky nearly threw herself into Jaggedtail's nest, nuzzling him all over and lapping her tongue across his face. Normally Jaggedtail would be embarrassed by his mother treating him like a kit, but as of right now he was really grateful for it.

"Oh, I'm so glad you're okay!" Fawnsky cried out, finally pulling back from Jaggedtail. "I've been worried sick about you!"

"We all have." Maplepool chimed in. "You really scared us all."

"I'm sorry." Jaggedtail dipped his head.

"How are you feeling?" Sunstorm questioned with concern in his mew.

"Sore but otherwise fine." Jaggedtail noticed Elmheart lurking towards the back, his fur was ungroomed and he looked like he hadn't slept. "How are *you?*" Jaggedtail directed at Elmheart.

Elmheart blinked. "I'm hanging in there." He forced a cheerful tone, but Jaggedtail could see the storm of pain raging in his amber eyes. "I'm glad that you're alright, you scared me half to death you stupid furball." He chuckled, but it was dry. *He's putting on an act.* Jaggedtail thought painfully.

"Alright you've seen that he's fine, but he still needs rest to heal that shoulder." Sagefeather called from outside the den.

His family was reluctant to leave, but they agreed. As they walked out, Jaggedtail stopped them. "Elmheart," He mewed. "Can I talk to you alone for a moment. I'll rest after this Sagefeather I promise."

Elmheart hesitated but agreed and the two were left alone. "You don't have to act for me." Jaggedtail mewed, keeping his voice low. "I can see the pain your in and I want to help."

Elmheart sighed. "It's just-- really hard. I feel like if I do anything to show it then I'll break down completely." Jaggedtail could see just how damaged Elmheart was, his body was shaking slightly and his eyes were hollow. "Seeing you come home, seeing my mother torn apart...and then seeing you collapse I just--" He voice cracked and

he closed his eyes. "I was so terrified that I had lost both of you, I couldn't see, sleep, eat or hardly even breathe."

Elmheart sat down, slumping his shoulders. "I don't know how much more agony like this I can take, Jaggedtail." He admitted, Jaggedtail knew just how much Elmheart hated showing emotions like this. "I feel like I'm losing everyone, I have no blood left in the Clan. I feel so alone."

"Hey," Jaggedtail forced himself to sit up, Elmheart looked up at him. "You're not alone, you will never be alone." Jaggedtail promised. "You may not have any blood, but you have so many cats who love you. I'm so sorry that I couldn't save Mosswing, I tried so, *so* hard but I was too late." Jaggedtail held back a whimper of sadness. *I've known Mosswing my entire life, she's always been like a second mother to me.*

"Please don't blame yourself, Jaggedtail. At least I have you still, I wouldn't be able to handle losing both of you."

Jaggedtail touched his muzzle to Elmheart's forehead. "You'll never lose me, I'm your best friend, your brother, and I will always be by your side no matter what."

Chapter 22

Jaggedtail stretched out his injured leg, it was still incredibly stiff and sore to move. He couldn't help but wince at the movement. Sagefeather, who was watching his movements shook his head. "You're still not ready to get back onto full warrior duties." Sagefeather stood up and gave his shoulder a sniff. "The wound is healing nicely, just slowly."

Jaggedtail groaned. "I feel like I'm going mad being trapped in camp all day long." He admitted. "It's the worst."

"I understand but you don't want to go make it worse by running out and hurting it more, do you?" Jaggedtail stubbornly shook his head. "Your sister had to endure the same thing when she hurt her leg when you two were apprentices, remember?"

"How could I forget?" Jaggedtail let out a small chuckle, glancing at his broken tail.

"Go ahead and get some prey, you need as much rest as possible." Jaggedtail thanked Sagefeather as he always did and stepped back into camp, breathing in the fresh-air. It was a warm, early greenleaf day and Jaggedtail's paws itched to be out in the forest, hunting with his Clanmates.

It had been nearly two moons since the fox attack and Jaggedtail was still recovering from his wound, just as his Clan was recovering from the deaths of Applepaw and Mosswing. Cherrypaw and Hazelshine had been completely torn apart by the death of Applepaw and had spent many nights together, mourning her loss. Elmheart had slowly began to recover from the loss of his mother, Jaggedtail didn't have anything else to do so he spent as much time with Elmheart and Maplepool as he could.

Ashstream had gotten away from the fight with very minimal wounds, and Foxpaw had suffered an injury to his hind leg but it wasn't serious. He had only been confined to camp for a quarter

moon. Jaggedtail hated that he couldn't train his apprentice, but he had become the temporary apprentice of Fieldfoot. Jaggedtail wanted his stupid wound to heal, he didn't want to miss out on Foxpaw's warrior ceremony.

Despite having a temporary mentor, Foxpaw would come to Jaggedtail after every single training session and tell him all about it, including demonstrating his new moves. It was one of the best parts of Jaggedtail's day, he was glad that Foxpaw hadn't left him behind as a mentor. Fieldfoot was a wonderful mentor, but Jaggedtail had grown so attached to Foxpaw, he missed training with him.

The worst of the injures aside from Jaggedtail had been Sparrowheart. While Jaggedtail had been unconscious, the fox grabbed his tail and dragged him across the forest floor, his tail was severely wounded and after they returned to camp, Sagefeather and Stormsong feared infection, so they removed half of his tail.

Sparrowheart had been so distraught by the death of Applepaw that he wanted to punish himself, no other cat agreed with him and tried to assure him that it wasn't his fault but Sparrowheart had gone to Birdstar and insisted that his name be changed to represent his new wound, Birdstar reluctantly agreed and Sparrowheart was renamed to Shorttail.

Under a new name, Shorttail had slowly begun to get back into his normal life, as did the rest of the Clan. Elmheart had resumed patrols and was taking better care of himself. Even Cherrypaw had returned to duties, but Jaggedtail couldn't help but notice how much the she-cat had changed. She had a dark shadow in her green eyes, and the way she carried herself and acted made her look so much older. She didn't look like an apprentice anymore, and it pained Jaggedtail to think that way.

As he left the medicine cat den, Jaggedtail spotted Elmheart returning from a patrol with Maplepool at his side, she had been spending extra time with him lately and Jaggedtail guessed it was because of everything that Elmheart had been through lately, Jaggedtail wanted to spend just as much time with his friend.

Jaggedtail limped across camp to meet up with his friend and sister. "How was the patrol?"

"The usual." Elmheart shrugged. "We patrolled the AshClan border so nothing much to report."

"Did Sagefeather say anything about your wound?" Maplepool questioned Jaggedtail, her eyes resting on his herb covered shoulder.

"I still can't go out on patrols or go hunt." Jaggedtail replied with a sigh. "I feel so trapped here." He grunted. "I just want to do something, I feel so useless just hanging around camp."

"That's because you *are* useless." Elmheart remarked with a playful sneer, Jaggedtail was so glad to see his friend making jokes again.

"Oh I'll show you useless." Jaggedtail swiped playfully at Elmheart's nose with his uninjured leg. "Just you wait, when Sagefeather says I'm better you're done for."

"Oh I'm sure." Elmheart swiped back and Jaggedtail bared his teeth playfully. He saw a new light in Elmheart's eyes, something that he hadn't seen in a long time and it filled his heart with complete joy. *He's getting better.* "I'll be waiting for that."

Jaggedtail rolled his eyes and along with Maplepool and Elmheart, picked up some prey from the fresh-kill pile and sat in front of the warriors den to eat. They had small conversations about various happenings in the Clan, but their attention was pulled as Cherrypaw and Mothflame stepped into the camp.

There was something different about Cherrypaw, she walked with her head high and long strides. The sunlight reflected off her ginger tabby pelt and her green eyes burned with a fierce determination. Her mentor broke off to go towards the leader's den and Cherrypaw began searching the camp for someone, Jaggedtail assumed it was for her mother.

"What's going on?" Jaggedtail questioned, nudging Maplepool and getting her attention towards Cherrypaw.

"I don't know." Maplepool shrugged. "I saw Cherrypaw out in the forest while we were patrolling but I just assumed it was a normal lesson."

"Was it her assessment?" Elmheart wondered aloud. "The moment she got back on duties she's been training incredibly hard."

"It's certainly showing." Maplepool pointed out. "The other day she brought back more prey than any other cat in our patrol."

"I wonder why she's working so hard." Jaggedtail questioned.

"Her sister just died." Elmheart spoke, he voice getting low. "She's trying to either distract herself or make up for the loss. She wants to make Applepaw proud by becoming a strong warrior, I started feeling the same way." His eyes grew dark again. "But I didn't want the Clan thinking I was weak over the loss, I needed to work hard, I couldn't just mourn and do nothing."

Maplepool rested her tail across Elmheart's shoulders and gave him a loving look, Elmheart nodded slowly and shook his head slightly. "Either way, Cherrypaw has certainly started to dedicate herself to LichenClan."

After a few moments, Birdstar stepped out of her den along with Mothflame. She called to Jumpheart who was visiting Daisyfern and his kits at the nursery and started heading towards the High Stump. At that moment it was all but confirmed that it was in fact Cherrypaw's warrior ceremony.

Birdstar jumped onto the High Stump and raised her voice. "Let all cats old enough to catch their own prey gather around the High Stump for a Clan meeting!" Jaggedtail, Elmheart and Maplepool quickly finished off their prey and joined their Clan in the center of camp.

Cherrypaw had already made her way to the center of the crowd, sitting with her head high. From the crowd Hazelshine watched with such a fierce, burning love deep in her amber eyes. *Hazelshine has so much love for her daughters.* Jaggedtail thought admirably. Jaggedtail found himself once more wondering who Cherrypaw's

father was. *Is he watching?* Jaggedtail looked around his Clanmates, none of them seemed to share Hazelshine's love. *Perhaps it's like Rowanfang, he didn't want kits so he chose not to be a father to them.* Jaggedtail's fur rose at the thought of Rowanfang. *Hazelshine has more than enough love for Cherrypaw, whoever the father is, he doesn't matter.*

"Applepaw's death was incredibly tragic, to lose such a young life is never easy, especially to her family." Birdstar began speaking. "But Cherrypaw has proven to work hard in the wake of her sister's death, not to forget her but to honor her memory and become a warrior that Applepaw, Mosswing and all of LichenClan can be proud of." Elmheart tensed slightly at the mention of his mother. Birdstar stepped from the High Stump and faced Cherrypaw.

"Cherrypaw, do you promise to uphold the warrior code and defend the Clan even at the cost of your life?" Birdstar questioned.

"I do." Jaggedtail had never heard such a raw, powerful and emotional response. *She's more than ready.*

"Then by the powers of StarClan I give you your warrior name! Cherrypaw, from this day forward you will be known as Cherrypool. StarClan honors your honor and dedication to your Clan and we welcome you as a full warrior of LichenClan!"

The newly named Cherrypool stepped forward as Birdstar rested her muzzle on the new warrior's head, Cherrypool in turn licked Birdstar's shoulder. "Cherrypool! Cherrypool! Cherrypool!" The Clan cheered their brand new warrior and Jaggedtail could hear Hazelshine's voice louder than anyone else.

When the ceremony ended, Hazelshine rushed up and swarmed her daughter. "Oh, Cherrypool! I'm so proud of you! And such a beautiful name too!" Hazelshine nuzzled her daughter's cheek, Cherrypool's green eyes filled with love and also grief. "Applepaw is so proud of you too, I can feel it."

Jaggedtail felt incredibly warmed by the display, he then turned to Maplepool and Elmheart who were also watching it. "Cherrypool really is a strong warrior." Maplepool purred. "LichenClan is

incredibly lucky to have her."

"Yeah," Elmheart lifted his head. "We need strong, passionate warriors like her."

Jaggedtail looked at Cherrypool once more, a cat who was once an energetic and goofy apprentice was now a powerful and mature warrior, Jaggedtail could only hope, however, that Cherrypool hadn't completely lost that energy.

Chapter 23

"This is the most important moment of your apprenticeship," Jaggedtail spoke boldly, looking at Foxpaw and Flamepaw with Maplepool at his side. "Because if you pass, it will be the *final* day of your apprenticeship."

"You two will be hunting alone, as Timberpaw and Willowpaw are far too young to be hunting with cats who are nearly warriors." Maplepool explained. "So this is will be completely dependant on your hunting skills alone."

"The weather is getting colder, but you've prepared for this and it's only leaf-fall. You should be able to catch plenty of prey." Jaggedtail added.

"Are you ready?" Maplepool questioned. Both apprentices had eagerness and excitement brewing in their eyes, they were both ready, Jaggedtail could tell.

"Of course!" Flamepaw boasted, holding her head high.

"Absolutely." Foxpaw dug his claws into the soil, her eyes burning with determination.

"Then head out." Maplepool commanded. "Jaggedtail and I will be following you two and watching but you won't be able to see us. We will give you some time to spread out." With a quick nod to each other, Flamepaw and Foxpaw vanished into the dense flora of LichenClan territory.

"I can't believe they're going to be warriors." Maplepool sighed, looking out into the forest with joy.

"I know," Jaggedtail chuckled. "It feels like just yesterday *we* were becoming warriors, and now we've trained some."

"Being with Flamepaw has been such a joy, she's such a wonderful

she-cat."

"Foxpaw too." Jaggedtail nodded in agreement. Jaggedtail had been allowed back on warrior duties two moons ago, and spent the past moon working incredibly hard to catch up on all his training with Foxpaw. Together, he and Maplepool had decided that both he and Flamepaw were ready for their assessments.

"Well," Maplepool stretched out. "We should go find them. Meet back here with them at sunhigh?" Jaggedtail looked at the sky, it was still a chilly early morning, so sunhigh would give them plenty of time to hunt.

"Sounds good." Jaggedtail and Maplepool began tracking the scents of their apprentices. Jaggedtail and Maplepool ended breaking off from each other not too far into the forest as Flamepaw and Foxpaw had gone different directions.

Jaggedtail tracked Foxpaw, finding the scent of fresh squirrel blood as well. *He's already caught something.* Jaggedtail thought proudly. After walking for a few more tail lengths Jaggedtail finally spotted Foxpaw.

His ginger apprentice was tracking something that Jaggedtail couldn't see. His form was nearly perfect and his amber eyes were focused intently on his prey. After a few moments of stalking, Foxpaw dashed forward to catch his prey. Jaggedtail saw that it was another squirrel, Foxpaw buried his catch and continued without hesitation.

Jaggedtail followed his apprentice silently as he continued with his assessment. As time went on Foxpaw caught two more squirrels and three mice. Jaggedtail felt pride overflowing from his chest. *I've trained him well, I'm so proud of him.*

After the catch if his final mouse, it was nearly sunhigh and Jaggedtail decided it was time. He stepped out of the bushes, getting Foxpaw's attention who seemed slightly alarmed at his sudden appearance, but he relaxed quickly.

"Hi, Jaggedtail." He greeted with a dip of his head, looking slightly

nervous. "Is it time to go back?"

Jaggedtail nodded, trying not to reveal how proud he was as he and Maplepool agreed to share their thoughts after the assessment. "I'll help you gathering your prey."

"How did I do?" Foxpaw asked eagerly.

"You'll find out once we meet up with our sisters." Jaggedtail gave Foxpaw a playful glance, Foxpaw looked disappointed but didn't complain. Together, he and Foxpaw gathered up Foxpaw's prey and arrived at the meeting place, it didn't take long for Maplepool and Flamepaw to arrive as well.

Jaggedtail saw that Flamepaw had four mice and two squirrels. *Only one less than her brother.* Jaggedtail thought, both cats were exceptional hunters. Flamepaw and Foxpaw sat down beside each other while Jaggedtail sat beside Maplepool. "So," Maplepool mewed. "Want me to start?" She checked with Jaggedtail who gave his sister a nod.

"Flamepaw, you hunting incredibly well with precision and confidence. Watching you hunt was like watching a senior warrior hunt and I am incredibly proud of you. I'm happy to say that you have passed." There was a burst of excitement in Flamepaw's eyes, but she sat still.

"Foxpaw, I am very proud of the skills you have displayed throughout your apprenticeship, today is no exception. When you became my apprentice you were hyperactive and easily distracted, despite this you have become a very skilled and talented cat without losing what makes you who you are. You have passed as well."

"Awesome!" Foxpaw jumped up off the ground, allowing Flamepaw to rejoice as well. "We're gonna be warriors!" He nuzzled his sister affectionately. Jaggedtail recalled his own warrior ceremony, a lot of cats expect warriors to become instantly serious and mature, but Jaggedtail hoped that Flamepaw and Foxpaw would hold onto this energy for a long time.

"StarClan, I call upon you to look down upon this two apprentices for they have worked long and hard to understand the ways of your noble code and I commend them to you as warriors in their turn." Birdstar's voice rang out through the trees during the ceremony. Jaggedtail and Maplepool watched proudly from the crowd, not far from Hareclaw and Amberflame watched with a fierce pride burning deep in their eyes.

"Foxpaw and Flamepaw, do you promise to uphold the warrior code and defend the Clan even at the cost of your lives?" Birdstar asked, facing the two apprentices who stood tall and eager.

"I do." Foxpaw spoke with confidence and joy.

"I do." Flamepaw mewed boldly beside her brother.

"Then by the powers of StarClan I give you your warrior names! Foxpaw, from this day forward you will be known as Foxwhisker. StarClan honors your energy and skills as a hunter." Foxwhisker stepped forward, licking Birdstar's shoulder as she rested her muzzle on his head. "Flamepaw, from this day forward you will be known as Flamewhisker. StarClan honors your loyalty and kindness to your Clanmates." Flamewhisker repeated the same ritual and the two stepped back. "I welcome both of you as full warriors of LichenClan!"

"Foxwhisker! Flamewhisker! Foxwhisker! Flamewhisker!" Jaggedtail, Maplepool and the rest of LichenClan cheered the new warriors who soaked in the praise like sunlight. Hareclaw and Amberflame trotted up to their kits to congratulate them. Jaggedtail watched the family with a warmth in his chest. He was very happy that Foxwhisker was a full warrior, but he had to admit he would miss spending his days training the young tom. *But now I can fight and hunt alongside him.*

"Now what do we do with our days?" Maplepool asked with a chuckle. "Flamewhisker took up so much of my time--not that I'm complaining."

"Well," Jaggedtail mewed, stretching out his legs. "We return to normal duties and patrols, I guess now that we don't have

apprentices to train we just become normal warriors again."

"I suppose." Maplepool yawned. "Where's Elmheart?" She looked around for the dark brown tom. "Is he still out on patrol?"

"I think so." Jaggedtail recalled that Elmheart had been sent out on the sunhigh patrol, Jaggedtail was sad that Elmheart had missed the ceremony but he could tell his friend all about it when he came back.

"While we wait for him do you wanna get us some prey? I'm starving." Maplepool mewed. Jaggedtail agreed and crossed the camp to the fresh-kill pile, he nearly reached it when he felt someone bump into his side. He turned and saw Cherrypool, the she-cat deep in thought. When she bumped into Jaggedtail it snapped her back into reality however.

"Oh! Sorry, Jaggedtail." Her green eyes darted away sheepishly and she shuffled her paws in embarrassment.

"It's alright, Cherrypool. Is everything alright? You looked a little lost."

Cherrypool's eyes flared up with embarrassment and she shook her head, Jaggedtail couldn't help but chuckle slightly. *I've never really spent a lot of time around Cherrypool but she never seemed so shy.* "No-no, I was just thinking about stuff." She shrugged. "I didn't mean to bother you."

"You haven't." Jaggedtail assured her. "I was just going to grab some prey for me and Maplepool, you could join us if you wanted to?" Jaggedtail wasn't sure if she would take him up on the offer, but he figured he would at least try. He only ever really saw Cherrypool spending time with her mother.

Cherrypool seemed even more flustered at his words. "I'm fine--" She dipped her head. "I already ate, but thank you for the offer. I'll leave you be!" Cherrypool quickly turned away, leaving Jaggedtail incredibly confused. He shrugged it off and continued on his way to the fresh-kill pile. *I'm not sure what was wrong with her, but I hope she's okay.* Jaggedtail grabbed two of the mice that Flamewhisker

and Foxwhisker had caught and brought it back to his sister, waiting for Elmheart to arrive.

Chapter 24

Numbness spread throughout Jaggedtail's paws, he suppressed a shiver as he trekked through the snow covered forest. Leaf-bare had completely taken over the forest in a matter of days, leaving the cats of LichenClan cold and hungry. Prey had retreated to their own warm dens, and hunting had become a struggle. Lack of prey had only been the beginning of the struggles for leaf-bare, however, as a few cats in the Clan had already began complaining about coughs.

The ones that had come forward so far were Featherheart, Patchfoot and Skytail. Though Patchfoot was the only one that had been fully diagnosed with whitecough and confined to Sagefeather's and Stormsong's den. Jaggedtail feared sickness taking hold of his Clanmates, especially those closest to him. Jaggedtail knew that every cat around him feared the same, especially Elmheart. He winced at every cough he heard, and would immediately check to see who it came from, usually looking at Jaggedtail and Maplepool. Luckily, none of them had felt any form of sickness.

Jaggedtail kept his anxious paws busy by hunting for his Clanmates, it was the best possible thing he could do to keep them healthy. He was currently on his second patrol of the day, accompanied by Hareclaw, his new apprentice Owlpaw, Elmheart, Kestrelflame, Hazelshine and Daisyfern.

Owlpaw, as well as Rabbitpaw, Twigpaw and Mousepaw had all been named apprentices a few days ago. Their apprenticeship had left the nursery empty, but the apprentice den was full of eager cats. Jaggedtail held onto his hope as hard as he possibly could, he had to keep his spirits high for the cold season.

"Jaggedtail," Hareclaw's voice pulled Jaggedtail out of his thoughts, he turned to look at his former mentor. "You and Elmheart go hunt near the AshClan border, Owlpaw and I will hunt near the river and Kestrelflame, Daisyfern and Vinetail will hunt closer to the MoonClan border. I don't want any cat to return unless they've caught at least two pieces of prey."

None of the cats on the patrol complained, they simply listened to Hareclaw's orders and set out into the cold forest. Jaggedtail was happy to be hunting alongside his best friend, it felt like it had been so long. "I hate this stupid weather." Elmheart cursed, his paws kicking up snow. "It sucks having to hunt with dark fur in the snow."

"Tell me about it." Jaggedtail snorted, with both of their dark red pelts they stood out like a splash of blood against the white powder. "But there's pure white cats who hunt just as well during every other season."

"I know," Elmheart flicked his ears and shot a playful glance at Jaggedtail. "But I'm still going to complain about it.

Jaggedtail set down his catch confidently, proud at such a plump piece of prey for his Clan. In a moment, Jaggedtail's blood turned as cold as the snow underneath his paws. He heard coughing, and the only cat close to him was Elmheart. Jaggedtail left his prey behind and quickly tracked the sound. He spotted Elmheart, he was sitting down with his head hunched over, coughing heavily.

"Elmheart..." Jaggedtail muttered. "How long have you been coughing?"

Once Elmheart stopped coughing he lifted his head, the coughing had clearly been painful. "It just start--" Elmheart broke into another coughing fit, leaving his body shaking. Fear raced through Jaggedtail's body and he bounded over to his friend, letting Elmheart lean against him.

"It just started, I'm fine Jaggedtail." Elmheart assured, but Jaggedtail could hear how dry and raspy his voice was.

"No you need to go see Sagefeather, this could very easily turn to greencough over night." Jaggedtail nudged Elmheart to his paws.

"Jaggedtail I--" Jaggedtail looked at Elmheart with pleading eyes, Elmheart stopped mid sentence and let out a sigh. "Fine, I'll go see Sagefeather and Stormsong."

Jaggedtail was relived for a moment. At Elmheart's insistence, they gathered the three pieces of prey that they had caught and began returning to camp. As they padded through the snowy forest they came across Hareclaw and Owlpaw. "What's going on?" Hareclaw questioned, they clearly hadn't caught what he had asked them to.

"Elmheart started coughing really bad, I want to get him into Sagefeather's den."

"Alright." Hareclaw dipped his head. "Get some rest Elmheart." The old tom mewed as Jaggedtail and Elmheart walked away. They reached camp and Jaggedtail noticed Fieldfoot helping Vinetail walk towards the medicine cat den as well. *Oh no.* Jaggedtail felt fear creep into his chest. *How many more are sick?*

They finally reached the medicine cat den and inside Patchfoot, Featherheart, Skytail and Mothflame were all lying in nests, sleeping and coughing. They arrived just after Fieldfoot and Vinetail, Sagefeather was looking over Vinetail. The she-cat already looked incredibly sick, her eyes were dull and her nose was streaming.

Sagefeather looked up from Vinetail as Jaggedtail and Elmheart stepped in. "Oh for StarClan's sake." The old medicine cat sighed. "Which one of you is sick?"

"Elmheart is." Jaggedtail replied.

"No, I'm not." Elmheart groaned with a dry voice.

"Are you a medicine cat?" Sagefeather snapped. "Stormsong, look at him please." Stormsong, who was sorting herbs in the back of the den quickly trotted over to Elmheart and began looking him over. Elmheart had another coughing fit as she neared. Stormsong sighed.

"Elmheart you are definitely sick, but I don't think it's greencough just yet, but you need to stay in the medicine cat den with us until further notice." Jaggedtail's heart twisted at Stormsong's words, his claws scraped against the floor of the den.

"Is there anything I can do to help?" Jaggedtail asked, trying to keep

his voice steady.

"Not unless your whiskers are made of catmint." Sagefeather commented, guiding Vinetail to another nest. She cast her dull, exhausted green eyes towards Jaggedtail. "Jaggedtail, the only way you can help right now is by letting Elmheart rest and hunting for your Clan. That's what warriors do, let us medicine cats handle the sickness. This is our battle, not yours."

Jaggedtail sighed, he knew that Sagefeather was right but he just hated not being able to help his best friend. He watched Elmheart curl up into a nest beside Patchfoot, he seemed so exhausted. *Stay strong, Elmheart.* Jaggedtail said silently before turning out of the medicine cat den. Fieldfoot looked just as worried as Jaggedtail felt, he crossed the camp to where Mousepaw and Twigpaw were sitting, he hoped for their sake that Vinetail would recover. *I want every single cat to recover.* Jaggedtail thought, lowering his head.

Movement caught Jaggedtail's eye and he spotted Maplepool entering camp from her own hunting patrol along with Sunstorm, Badgerstrike, Breezefall and Poppywing. Each of them had quite a bit of prey and looked happy about their haul. Jaggedtail let out a quiet sigh, he had to tell Maplepool about Elmheart.

Jaggedtail crossed camp to meet up with his sister. "Hey there." Maplepool greeted cheerfully. "What's going on? You looked stressed?"

Jaggedtail lowered his head. "Elmheart is sick."

Fear crossed Maplepool's face, her green eyes went wide and dull. "What? He's sick? For how long? Is it greencough?"

Jaggedtail shook his head. "Stormsong doesn't think it's greencough yet, but she's keeping him in the medicine den for now." Pain surged through Maplepool's eyes, and something else but Jaggedtail couldn't quite place it.

She let out a shaky breath. "We just have to be strong for him, Elmheart wouldn't want us to drive ourselves crazy with worry." Jaggedtail admired his sister's strength, he just wanted to curl up

into a ball and sleep but Maplepool was right. *We need to be strong, for Elmheart.*

LichenClan continued with their day, hunting hard for their Clanmates and struggling to keep spirits high. The sun was slowly falling behind the snow filled clouds, making way for another frigid night. Jaggedtail huddled close by Maplepool as they shared a small squirrel. He watched the camp and his Clan settled down into their nests to keep warm.

He watched Jumpheart walking with Birdstar towards the leader's den, the leader seemed to be walking strange. Jaggedtail convinced himself he was seeing things until Birdstar's legs gave out from under her and she fell into the snow. "Birdstar!" Jumpheart cried out and the rest of LichenClan were on their paws, rushing over to their leader.

Sagefeather had heard Jumpheart's call and was sprinting over towards the leaders den in a gray blur. She skidded to a stop near, Birdstar, kicking up a flurry of snow as she did so. *Is she dead?* Jaggedtail's stomach flipped in knots. *Is this her last life?*

Sagefeather sniffed Birdstar's body. "She's not dead or losing a life." Sagefeather mewed. "But she is definitely sick." Sagefeather stood up. "Jumpheart, Sunstorm. Carry her to my den, I'm going to get a nest for her made."

"Sagefeather!" Stormsong's fear-filled cry filled the air as the other medicine cat poked her head out of the den. "I need you now!" Jaggedtail and Maplepool shared a horrified glance. *Who is in trouble?*

"Do what I said." Sagefeather snapped at the two toms and then sprinted back to her den. Sunstorm and Jumpheart carried Birdstar's limp body to the medicine cat den as Sagefeather had commanded but all of LichenClan had been shaken, they had no idea what Stormsong had been calling about and they had just watched their leader collapse. It seemed like an eternity after Sunstorm and Jumpheart had entered the medicine cat, Maplepool buried her nose into Jaggedtail's pelt and they both feared the absolute worst for their friend.

When Jumpheart and Sunstorm finally stepped out of the medicine cat den into camp, Jaggedtail noticed that Jumpheart's head was low and Sunstorm's eyes clouded over with grief. *Who died?* Jaggedtail's heart twisted into a thousand knots.

Jumpheart finally lifted his head, his eyes glazed over. "Patchfoot is dead." His voice was raw. "And Birdstar has greencough."

Jaggedtail could feel the sadness spread through the air, Cedarcloud let out a cry of sorrow from where she sat as Hazelshine sprinted to her mother's side. "Patchfoot was my brother, a father, a wonderful mate and an amazing warrior, I know I speak for our whole family that we will feel this loss for the rest of our lives, but LichenClan can't stop providing for the sick cats. Our medicine cats are working hard, and we need to do everything we can in our power as warriors to help."

Jaggedtail could see the pain across Jumpheart's face as he lost his brother, but as the Clan deputy he had to step up while Birdstar was sick. *I hope the time doesn't come soon, but I know that Jumpheart will make an incredible leader.* Jaggedtail couldn't help but admire his strength and dedication to LichenClan.

Jaggedtail looked up towards the night sky as snow began to fall across the forest floor. *Please, StarClan. Don't take anymore warriors from us.*

Chapter 25

Jaggedtail dropped his prey on the painfully small fresh-kill pile, it was getting smaller and smaller every day and hunting was getting harder as leaf-bare raged through the forest. It spared no mercy on the cats of the forest and Jaggedtail felt the cold biting into his skin with every move. The other Clans hadn't had it any easier as in the last gathering it was announced that Goldenstar had been claimed by greencough and the Clan was now led by Ivystar, and Jaggedtail feared that the same would happen to LichenClan's leader.

More cats had gotten sick in the almost full moon since Patchfoot's death, Breezefall, Baderstrike, Ashstream and Twigpaw had all moved into the medicine cat den as well and just a few days ago Mothflame had lost her life to her sickness. Jaggedtail had barely been able to speak to Elmheart, he tried to visit but every time he was shooed away from Sagefeather.

Jaggedtail found it harder and harder to keep going with the constant fear of losing Elmheart, but with the help of Maplepool he somehow found the strength to hunt for his Clanmates.

"Cats of LichenClan!" Sagefeather's call rang out across camp, getting the attention as well as confusing many cats. The medicine cat's long fur was unkempt and her eyes were glazed over with exhaustion. "I'm so saddened to announce the death of Featherheart." Jaggedtail's stomach flipped. *Another cat dead.* Jaggedtail thought, feeling incredibly sick. *How many more will we lose.*

"I'm officially declaring a quarantine on the sick cats. I don't want any cat stepping near the medicine cat den." Sagefeather explained. "But I still don't think that's enough. I will be taking the sickest cats with me to the old badger den outside camp. I believe this will be the best way to prevent others from getting sick, as well as allowing the others to recover easier. The only cat allowed to visit these sick cats is Stormsong, who will usually be staying behind with the ones in the medicine cat den."

"Who are you taking?" Fieldfoot spoke up, the tom shook with fear as both his mate and daughter were in the den with sickness.

"Vinetail, Birdstar, Skytail, Bagderstrike and Twigpaw." Field Foot's legs trembled and he sat down, Mousepaw running to his side to comfort his father. Jaggedtail couldn't help but feel grateful that Elmheart would be staying behind, it meant that he wasn't as sick as the others.

"So that means Elmheart, Breezefall and Ashstream are staying behind." Maplepool spoke quietly beside Jaggedtail. "That will be a much easier task for Stormsong." Jaggedtail nodded, Featherheart was Stormsong's mother, Jaggedtail wondered how the young medicine cat was handling the loss. Meanwhile Jumpheart had lost his brother and mate, and his leader was on the brink of death but he still managed to lead his Clan in her absence.

"Please keep hunting for your sick Clanmates." Sagefeather continued. "Let Stormsong and I work, we are doing everything we can to keep them alive. We won't let any cats die without a fight."

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Jaggedtail returned from patrol and much to his relief, no other cats had died yet but the camp still felt like it was covered by a thick cloud of grief. The Clan was scared and mourning the loss of three cats but something told Jaggedtail that it wasn't the end. Leaf-bare wasn't even half-way over, and it would take a long time before the snow melted.

Jaggedtail found himself pacing in camp as he thoughts consumed him, he couldn't even imagine life without Elmheart. The tom had been by his side his entire life, he didn't want to lose him.

"Jaggedtail." A strained voice spoke from behind him. Jaggedtail turned his head and saw Stormsong, the medicine cat looking incredibly exhausted, her blue eyes filled completely with grief. "You're worried about Elmheart, aren't you?"

Jaggedtail nodded slowly. "He's my best friend, he's practically my brother."

"If it helps, Elmheart's sickness hasn't developed into greencough. He has whitecough pretty badly but he's a fully grown, strong warrior. He will be able to fight this off, I'm sure of it."

Jaggedtail let out a sigh of relief It really did help, knowing that Elmheart was so strong. "Thank you Stormsong, LichenClan is lucky to have you."

"Maybe." Stormsong's ear twitched. "I'm just getting some prey for the three cats in there. Sagefeather is doing the real work out there." She cast her gaze out towards the badger den behind the camp. "I just hope she can help them." The gray she-cat let out a sigh. "Leaf-bare is so hard." She muttered, but as she walked away Jaggedtail felt that she was no longer talking to him. *Even when leaf-bare is over, we will all still have to recover from the loss. Especially the medicine cats.*

Jaggedtail stopped his pacing and crossed the camp to find Fawnsky, Sunstorm and Maplepool. When he found them he shared Stormsong's news of Elmheart, they all expressed extreme relief especially Maplepool, once again her gaze filled with something soft and sweet, Jaggedtail wished he could tell what it was. *What's going on with Maplepool?* He wondered.

"Stormsong!" Sagefeather's cry filled the freezing air. "Stormsong come quick! I need you *now!*"

Stormsong had been on her way back to the medicine cat den with prey but she dropped it in the middle of camp and broke off in a sprint towards Sagefeather who had already turned back into the forest. *No.* Jaggedtail knew that it meant someone was dying. LichenClan was now on edge, no words were spoken they just said in a painful, grief-filled silence as they awaited news.

Stormsong and Sagefeather were gone for a long time, LichenClan was forced to return to duties an go on patrols while they waited, but Jaggedtail couldn't leave, he couldn't hunt or focus on anything. He opted out of patrols for the time being, he had to know. He wouldn't leave his camp until Sagefeather and Stormsong returned, Maplepool and Fieldfoot did the same.

At long last, Stormsong returned but Jaggedtail could see the pain across her face as she dragged her paws through the snow. Jumpheart ran to her side. "Stormsong...what happened?"

Stormsong looked at her Clan, fear filling her eyes. "I'm so sorry...Birdstar is dead."

There was a painful silence in the air, no cat really knew what to say. Pretty much every single cat had known Birdstar has leader for their entire lives, Jaggedtail didn't know what to think of her death. *She's all so many of us have ever known.*

After the long, painful silence Jumpheart finally spoke. "Cats of LichenClan," His voice was dry with grief. "I've known Birdstar my whole life, and I know most of you have as well. She was an amazing leader, she kept the peace and led with loyalty and conviction, she led LichenClan through an era of peace I know that her memory will be preserved for countless moons. The name Birdstar will never be forgotten."

LichenClan held another long moment of silence for their leader. "Tomorrow I will head out to the Moonstone, and I hope that I can even be half the leader that Birdstar was."

"You will do amazing Jumpheart." Hareclaw spoke up. "You've been leading us for this past moon, and I know that all of LichenClan is behind you."

Jaggedtail and the rest of the LichenClan agreed. *Despite losing so much, Jumpheart has kept LichenClan productive, he's kept us busy and strong. Who knows what would've happened without him.*

"Jumpheart! Jumpheart! Jumpheart!" The cats cheered their next leader and Jumpheart lowered his head, looking incredibly humble. *Change is coming to LichenClan, we are entering a new era of leadership and life. What is going to happen, now that Birdstar is gone?* Jaggedtail let out a low sigh. *Whatever happens, I know that LichenClan will stay strong. We have to.*

Chapter 26

Jaggedtail breathed in the sweet scent of freshly bloomed flora in LichenClan territory, no longer did his paws and ear tips sting from the bitter cold of leaf-bare. Instead, he felt the soft earth beneath his paws. The birds had returned and filled the forest with their sweet melodies.

Leaf-bare had left the forest and newleaf had taken its place. It had been two moons since Birdstar's death and LichenClan was recovering from such a harsh leaf-bare. LichenClan had been forever changed by the death of their leader but Jumpstar proved himself to be a more than capable leader in her wake. Jaggedtail had high hopes for LichenClan's future.

In the two moons that had passed, the Clan had done the best to move on from the deaths of loved ones. Jaggedtail knew that Jumpstar had lost a lot to the sickness, but the leader kept his head high. He had named Daisyfern his deputy, Jaggedtail assumed it was to keep his daughter as close as possible. Daisyfern was a responsible deputy, keeping LichenClan busy and the Clan fed.

The rest of the cats who had been sick recovered back to full health including Elmheart. It was as if he had never been sick in the first place, the tom was back to his old, confident self and Jaggedtail couldn't be happier. He could sense a bright new future for LichenClan, and Jaggedtail was so excited to see it.

With a large prey collection in tow, Jaggedtail returned proudly from his hunting patrol along with Hareclaw, Poppywing and Breezefall. Each of them carried a large amount of prey, by the time they returned there would be enough prey for all of LichenClan to sleep with full bellies.

"Hey, Jaggedtail." Jaggedtail looked up from his prey, noticing Maplepool approaching him. She cast a glance at Cherrypool, something seemed off about Maplepool's posture, there was a sense of excitement as well as fear deep in her green eyes. *What's up with*

her?

"Hey Maplepool." Jaggedtail looked up at his sister curiously. "What can I do for you?"

"I need to talk to you, actually." Maplepool mewed, she seemed to be struggling to keep her voice steady. "Alone, if you don't mind Cherrypool."

"Of course not." Cherrypool purred, her voice sounding like honey. "He's all yours." Jaggedtail felt incredibly confused, but stood up and looked at Maplepool.

"Come on, let's go for a walk." Jaggedtail cast a look at Cherrypool, still feeling incredibly confused. What was so important that they had to be alone? Did something happen? Maplepool didn't seem sad or distraught. Jaggedtail sighed and calmed his thoughts, he would find out in just a few moments, he just had to wait.

Maplepool guided Jaggedtail out of camp, and he waited until they were a good distance away from camp to speak. "So what's going on? You're acting weird." Jaggedtail pointed, but then he recalled Maplepool had been acting weird the last few days. He hoped that everything was alright.

"Well," Maplepool took a deep breath. "There's something that I've been meaning to tell you, we just haven't found the right time but now I am certain it is the right time."

"*We?*" Jaggedtail tilted his head, Maplepool wasn't making this any easier for him. "Who is *we?*"

"Me and Elmheart." Maplepool mewed, her eyes getting softer. "We've been getting closer and closer and well...after Mosswing died he came to me for help."

"Yeah," Jaggedtail nodded slowly, still not quite sure where she was going with this. "He came to me too."

"He came to me in a...*different* way." Maplepool sat down, resting her soft tail across her paws. "Elmheart came to me and told me everything on his mind, he told me how he had been feeling about

his parents and how he had been feeling about me. He told me that he needed more than just a friend, and I realized I wanted him in the same way."

The pieces slowly began to form in Jaggedtail's mind. "Wait are you--""

"Elmheart and I are in love, Jaggedtail. We have been for several moons now, I don't know why we didn't tell you we just didn't know how you would react. Elmheart was afraid that you wouldn't approve."

Jaggedtail was silent for a moment, slowly trying to figure out how to process what Maplepool was telling him. *My sister and Elmheart...are mates?* He shook his head, he could tell that Maplepool was slightly nervous. "Why wouldn't I approve? My sister and my best friend becoming mates? Of course I'm not upset, Maplepool." Jaggedtail leaned in and gave his sister a reassuring nuzzle. "I love both of you so much, and I know that Fawnsky will love it, so would Mosswing."

Maplepool let out a relieved exhale of breath. "I'm glad to hear that, but there's one more thing I need to tell you. It's kind of why I decided to finally tell you."

"What is it?"

Maplepool took a deep breath. "I'm expecting Elmheart's kits."

Jaggedtail's jaw dropped. "Really? You're expecting kits?" He looked up and down Maplepool, upon looking closer he could see that she was getting better. *My sister is going to have kits. I'm going to be an uncle!* "Maplepool that's amazing!" Jaggedtail nuzzled up and down his sister, she let out purrs of amusement. "I'm so happy for you!"

"Thank you." Maplepool purred loudly, Jaggedtail was certain that they could hear her purrs all the way in SunClan camp. "I know Elmheart is excited, but I think he's nervous about becoming a father."

"Well I need to congratulate him to his face!"

Jaggedtail and Maplepool returned to camp and found Elmheart, he looked at Maplepool with an anxious gaze but then turned his attention to Jaggedtail. "Elmheart I'm so happy for you two." Jaggedtail nuzzled his best friend. "You're going to make an amazing father."

"It means a lot to hear that from you, Jaggedtail." Elmheart dipped his head. "I'm both terrified and excited."

"Well I know that you will both do amazing." Jaggedtail purred, turning to Maplepool. "Have you told Fawnsky and Sunstorm?"

"Not yet." Maplepool shuffled her paws. "You're the only cat besides us and Sagefeather who knows."

"Well knowing our mother once she knows it will spread like wildfire." Jaggedtail snorted with laughter.

"We should go tell them." Elmheart stood up. "Now that Jaggedtail knows, I want the entire Clan to know." He pressed his muzzle to Maplepool. "I want the entire forest to know how much I love you."

Jaggedtail felt incredibly warmed by Elmheart's display. *All I want for both of them is to be happy, and what's better than them being happy together?* Together, the three cats crossed the camp to find Sunstorm and Fawnsky who were sharing two mice together and talking about Sunstorm's last patrol.

"Hey there you three." Sunstorm greeted them with his usual kind mew and warm amber eyes. "You look like you got something on your mind."

"We do." Maplepool mewed, taking a deep breath. "I'm expecting Elmheart's kits."

Fawnsky jumped to her paws, her green eyes bursting with love and excitement. "Oh, Maplepool!" Fawnsky rushed to her daughter, nuzzling and licking her all over. "Oh that makes me so happy! She placed a paw gently on Maplepool's belly. "How far along are you?" "Sagefeather thinks I'm barely a half moon along, so it won't be for a while at least." Maplepool purred.

"I'm so happy for you." Sunstorm nuzzled Maplepool's cheek, then turned to Elmheart. "And I'm happy for you as well, Elmheart. I see the way my kits care about you, you've always been like family, but now I am proud to officially call you a member of this family."

Elmheart seemed completely taken aback by Sunstorm's words, his amber eyes overflowed with emotion. Elmheart bowed his head. "Thank you so much, Sunstorm. That means the world to me." He lifted his head. "I've always seen Jaggedtail as a brother, but thank you for welcoming me."

"Oh, Elmheart." Fawnsky stopped loving on Maplepool to go give Elmheart a loving nudge. "Mosswing would be so proud of you, I know she would. I know she will be watching over Maplepool and your kits from StarClan."

"Thank you, Fawnsky." Elmheart whispered, nuzzling Fawnsky in return.

"So when will you be giving us some grandkits?" Sunstorm turned to Jaggedtail, who was shocked by the question. His pelt began to burn and he flattened his ears.

"Well uh--whenever I meet the right cat, I guess?"

"Are you serious?" Maplepool chuckled, giving Jaggedtail a skeptical look.

"What?" Jaggedtail tilted his head. *Am I missing something?* All the cats around him gave him the same look, like they understood something that he didn't. "What am I missing here?"

"It's a good thing you're handsome, brother." Maplepool laughed and the others shared one at his expense as well. Jaggedtail's pelt burned hotter, he lapped the fur on his chest in embarrassment. "You should go back to Cherrypool, you shouldn't keep her waiting."

Jaggedtail suddenly remembered that he was sharing prey with Cherrypool. "Oh," He looked over his shoulder, Cherrypool was sitting in the same place he had left her. Her green eyes were cast up towards the sky, her mind lost in the clouds. The sun dappled

across her ginger tabby pelt, making it shimmer. Jaggedtail felt his heart skip a beat once again, just looking at her.

"Hey--" Jaggedtail whipped his head around. "Do you mean--"

"You are hopeless, Jaggedtail." Elmheart shook his head. "We all see the way you look at each other, especially the way she looks at you."

Maplepool walked up to Jaggedtail. "Go take her out into the forest for a walk, I bet she will be thrilled to go."

Jaggedtail felt incredibly flustered, but he listened to Maplepool's advice. He approached Cherrypool, she heard him coming and focused back on the world around her. Jaggedtail had to admit, he liked the way she looked when she was lost in thought. *I never really thought about that.* Jaggedtail thought to himself. *She really is beautiful, though. She's thoughtful, and an amazing warrior...* Jaggedtail shook his head, trying to find the words to speak to her.

"Sorry about that." He apologized.

"Don't worry about it." Cherrypool purred. "What did Maplepool need to talk to you about."

Jaggedtail assumed that since Maplepool and Elmheart were telling Fawnsky and Sunstorm that it was okay to tell others. "Maplepool is expecting Elmheart's kits." He explained.

"Oh that's wonderful." Cherrypool purred. "Kits are so wonderful to have in camp, and I'm so happy for Elmheart and Maplepool."

"Me too." Jaggedtail found himself drawn to everything about Cherrypool, he couldn't focus on anything else. *We all see the way you look at each other, especially the way she looks at you.* Elmheart's words rang in Jaggedtail's ears. *How does she look at me?* "Hey..." Jaggedtail shuffled his paws, feeling like an awkward apprentice. "Do you want to go for a walk with me?"

Cherrypool's eyes widened slightly, she looked just as flustered as Jaggedtail felt. "S-sure, where did you have in mind."

"Let's just walk." Jaggedtail purred. "We'll see where we end up." Cherrypool's gaze softened and she stood up. Jaggedtail and Cherrypool walked side by side out of camp, Jaggedtail couldn't help but walk a little closer to Cherrypool than usual. They left camp and entered the thick forest. They didn't say much at first, but Jaggedtail just enjoyed being in her company.

They reached the training area and Jaggedtail noticed the fallen branch that had fallen on top of his tail, it was broken and slowly rotting away but Jaggedtail couldn't happen at the memory. "This is the branch that broke my tail." Jaggedtail mewed, nudging the branch with his paw, chipping the bark slightly.

"Really?" Cherrypool laughed. "I will still a kit then, but I remembered hearing about it. Maplepool hurt her leg too, right?"

Jaggedtail nodded. "We were practicing climbing trees, Maplepool was a natural at it but I still hate it."

"Really?" Cherrypool laughed. "I always liked climbing." Cherrypool readied herself to jump and shot forward, sticking herself to the base of the tree. She scaled the side of it until she reached the lowest branch, just seeing her so high made Jaggedtail's stomach flip.

"Please be careful." Jaggedtail laughed to hide his pure anxiety.

Cherrypool chuckled. "I won't go too high." Cherrypool went up one more branch. "Applepaw hated climbing as well, but she loved swimming."

"I hate that too." Jaggedtail flicked his tail, he craned his neck to look up at Cherrypool. The ginger tabby stood up and purred down at Jaggedtail, she took a step and let out a sharp cry as her paw slipped off the branch and she began to fall. Jaggedtail's heart twisted in a sharp knot as she began to fall, he jumped forward, hoping to break Cherrypool's fall.

She landed heavily on top of him and he fell to the ground, pain spread throughout his back but he could tell Cherrypool was okay by the sharp exhale of breath she let out. Cherrypool rolled off his

back and laid on the ground beside him. Jaggedtail could barely catch his breath from the fear that had gripped his head. Cherrypool lifted her head, her muzzle nearly grazing his. "I told you to be careful." Jaggedtail breathed out.

"I'm sorry." Cherrypool apologized. "Thank you for catching me."

Jaggedtail breathed out a laugh. "No problem." Jaggedtail held her gaze as they slipped into silence, green staring into amber and the world around Jaggedtail faded away, it was just Cherrypool.

"Jaggedtail I--" Cherrypool began to speak but stopped herself, shaking her head and sat up, closing her eyes tightly.

"Cherrypool, what's wrong?" Jaggedtail sat up beside her, her face was twisted with frustration. She shook her head. "Come on," Jaggedtail rested his tail across her shoulders. "You can tell me."

She finally opened her eyes and looked deep into his. "Jaggedtail...I've felt this way for a long time..." She looked away. "Ever since I was an apprentice I admired you, you were so brave and strong. You always looked at me with kind eyes, you never looked at me with sympathy like everyone else." Jaggedtail didn't realize he had done that, or that others had treated her that way. "After Applepaw died, I wanted to prove to everyone that I was still strong, that I wasn't some weak little she-cat who couldn't take care of herself." Cherrypool looked back up at Jaggedtail. "But when I'm around you I-I feel like I can do anything. I guess I was kind of showing off by climbing that tree, I want you to like me the way that I like you." She looked away again, her claws gripping the forest floor.

"Cherrypool." Jaggedtail nudged her chin upward with his muzzle, making her look at him. "You don't need to show off for me to like you, I already do."

Cherrypool looked at him in disbelief. "You do?"

"Yeah, I do." Jaggedtail nodded slowly. "I guess I didn't really notice it at first, it just felt so natural being around you, but Cherrypool, the more I look at you the more I realize I want you around me all

the time, how much I want to be near you."

"Oh Jaggedtail..." She breathed out, pure bliss crossing Cherrypool's face.

"So Cherrypool..." Jaggedtail nuzzled her, breathing in her sweet scent. "Will you be my mate?"

"Nothing would make me happier." Cherrypool breathed into his ear. They didn't return to camp right away, instead they stayed in the forest close together. Jaggedtail wasn't expecting to leave this forest with a mate, but there was something about Cherrypool that made his heart soar, and he never wanted to lose that feeling.

Chapter 27

"From this day forward you will be known as Timberfall, LichenClan honors your hunting skills and honor." Jumpstar mewed, facing the pale brown tom. Timberfall licked Jumpstar's shoulder as the leader rested his muzzle on Timberfall's head. Timberfall stepped backward, standing beside Willowstrike, who had been named just before him.

"Willowstrike! Timberfall! Willowstrike! Timberfall!" The cats of LichenClan cheered their newest warriors. The two newest warriors were swarmed by Daisyfern and Breezefall, they celebrated their kits becoming warriors. Jaggedtail stood up and turned to Cherrypool who had been sitting beside him.

"New warriors are always nice." Cherrypool purred, her eyes sparkling with delight.

"Yeah," Jaggedtail twitched his tail. "But the warriors' den is becoming incredibly full, and it's probably not long until Twigpaw and the others are warriors too."

"Oh, come on." Cherrypool nudged Jaggedtail playfully. "Stop being so negative." Jaggedtail met Cherrypool's gaze, her green eyes burning with amusement.

"Fine." Jaggedtail sneered playfully at his mate and nudged her back. "We should try and find something to do now."

"Probably," Cherrypool stood up and looked towards Daisyfern who was still celebrating with her kits. "Though we may have to wait until they're done."

"We could go out hunting by ourselves, we don't always need to wait for Daisyfern to tell us what to do." Cherrypool suggested. Jaggedtail nodded, but he usually liked to follow the deputy's plan, it kept the Clan in order. Jaggedtail looked at Cherrypool again, his heart filling with happiness. It had nearly two moons since

Jaggedtail had asked Cherrypool to be his mate and everything seemed to be better. The sun shined a little brighter and prey tasted a little better, he slept beside Cherrypool every night and slept so peacefully as he breathed in her sweet scent.

Maplepool had yet to have her kits, but every cat knew that she was due any day. Maplepool's belly had gotten bigger but it wasn't as big as other queens had been. Sagefeather assured both Elmheart and Jaggedtail that she was healthy, just having a very small litter of kits.

Despite this, the two toms still felt concerned for Maplepool and Elmheart practically spent all of his time in the nursery, helping Maplepool and keeping her company as she was the only cat in the nursery. With the rise of newleaf, Jaggedtail was sure it wouldn't be long until more cats entered the nursery. Jaggedtail had considered having kits with Cherrypool, and he had been told many times by her that she wanted some he just didn't feel ready.

I want Cherrypool to be my mate for the rest of my days, but I just don't think I'm ready to be a father. Jaggedtail was worried about not being a good enough father, and he hoped that watching his best friend father kits would teach him something.

"Jaggedtail!" Jaggedtail's head whipped around as he heard Elmheart's call from across camp. His voice sounded both terrified and excited. *Is it finally happening?* "Maplepool is giving birth!"

Jaggedtail and Cherrypool shared a glance before sprinting over to the nursery where Elmheart was pacing outside, his tail flicking anxiously. "When did she start?" Jaggedtail questioned, causing Elmheart to stop his pacing.

"Just a few moments ago, Sagefeather and Stormsong are in there right now." Elmheart explained.

"This is so exciting." Cherrypool purred. "It will be so nice having kits in the Clan again."

Jaggedtail agreed, but he also couldn't shake the sharp feeling of anxiety biting at his chest. What if something happened to his

sister? Or the kits? Jaggedtail met Elmheart's gaze and he could tell that his friend was just as nervous. *Maplepool will be alright.* Jaggedtail told himself. *Sagefeather and Stormsong are the best medicine cats in the forest.*

"It will be over soon." Jaggedtail rested his tail on Elmheart's flank. "Before the day is over you'll finally be a father." Elmheart's amber eyes flashed gratefully and he took a deep breath.

"I can't wait, I just hope everything goes well."

"Well," Cherrypool nudged Elmheart forward. "You should be in there with your mate, she'll need your support."

Elmheart nodded. "Right." He took a deep shaky breath, Elmheart still had countless fears shimmering in the depths of his eyes. "I'll let you know both know when the kits are here." Jaggedtail watched Elmheart walk away and vanish into the nursery. Jaggedtail sat down beside Cherrypool, his heart pounding.

"I hope that everything goes okay."

"It will." Cherrypool purred, nuzzling Jaggedtail's cheek. "Maplepool is in very capable paws and she is strong and healthy, there's no reason for anything to go wrong."

Jaggedtail was grateful for his mate's words, but he still felt worried. He wished he could be in there with his sister and best friend, but he also knew that he would just be in the way. *Elmheart is there to comfort her, Maplepool will be okay.* Jaggedtail took a calming breath, all he could do was wait.

Maplepool had started kitting just past sunhigh and as the sun set upon the forest, she was still in the nursery. Every passing moment had Jaggedtail in such a panic. He struggled so hard to keep his calm in front of Cherrypool, she was the only thing keeping him from completely losing it.

Movement in the nursery entrance caught Jaggedtail's eye and his head snapped in that direction. It was Elmheart, he stepped into the camp and his amber eyes glowed fiercely with love and joy.

Jaggedtail and Cherrypool stood up and rushed towards the nursery to greet Elmheart. "So? How is she? How are the kits?"

"It was a very long kitting." Elmheart mewed. "And it's not kits--just kit. There was only one, but Jaggedtail..." Elmheart's voice cracked with emotion. "She's the most beautiful kit in the forest."

Jaggedtail was shocked to hear that Maplepool had given birth to only a single kit, she definitely didn't get as big as he had seen other queens, but he was just happy that Maplepool and the kit were okay. "Can I go see them?"

"Of course." It wasn't Elmheart who responded, but Sagefeather as both medicine cats stepped out of the nursery from behind Elmheart. "Maplepool is doing just fine, and she is ready for visitors just let her and the kit get some rest soon."

"Congratulations again, Elmheart." Stormsong mewed, but something seemed off about her tone. Stormsong's blue eyes were dark with sadness, and her voice low. *What's wrong with her?* Jaggedtail wondered. *Perhaps Stormsong is upset that she will never be able to have kits?* Jaggedtail thought that medicine cats just didn't think about that. Jaggedtail didn't want to fret too much over Stormsong, however, his sister was waiting for them.

Once Stormsong and Sagefeather had left, Jaggedtail stepped into the nursery. The air was heavy with the scent of milk and he rested his eyes on Maplepool, and the tiny kit pawing at her belly. "I'm so glad you're here." Maplepool purred. "Come meet your little niece."

Jaggedtail stepped closer, the little she-cat was light brown with a few lighter markings on one ear and her tail. "Oh my, Maplepool..." Jaggedtail felt a rush of love wash over him looking at the tiny little kit. *This cat is my kin, my own blood. The daughter of my sister and best friend.* Jaggedtail heard pawsteps behind him, he looked over his shoulder to see Cherrypool and Elmheart walking in behind him.

"Oh, Maplepool." Cherrypool purred loudly. "She's just so cute!" Her green eyes burned brightly with affection, Jaggedtail purred at how cute she looked. "Do you have a name for her yet?"

"Not yet." Elmheart responded.

"Actually..." Maplepool spoke up. "I've been thinking of this one for a while now." Elmheart and the others turned their attention to the queen. "I wanted to name her Mosskit, after Mosswing."

Elmheart's eyes went soft and he lowered his head slightly. He moved over to Maplepool and rested his muzzle on her head. "That's a perfect name." Cherrypool pressed against Jaggedtail as Maplepool and Elmheart shared a tender moment. He looked at how much closer Maplepool and Elmheart seemed now that they had a kit, it was as if something had changed within them.

They have moved on to the next stage of their lives. Jaggedtail thought. *They've officially grown up.* Jaggedtail looked at Cherrypool, did she want kits? Did she want to take that step? Was Jaggedtail ready to move on to that stage? He shook his head, he didn't want to think too much about that, he just wanted to celebrate LichenClan's newest life.

Chapter 28

It was such a beautiful day in the forest, it was prime greenleaf and the sun was beaming down across the forest. The air was warm and the forest full of energetic and plump prey. It had been a moon since Mosskit had been born and her birth was celebrated by the Clan. Maplepool was recovering well and was back to her usual self, it wouldn't be long until Mosskit was an apprentice and Maplepool was back on her duties.

Meanwhile, when Elmheart wasn't hunting or on patrol he was spending time with Mosskit and Maplepool. It warmed Jaggedtail's heart watching him play with his daughter. Elmheart clearly had so much love for Mosskit in his heart and Jaggedtail was thrilled to see his best friend so happy. *Elmheart has struggled so much, he deserves this happiness.*

Jaggedtail had continued to find his own happiness in Cherrypool, the beautiful she-cat continued to make his life better and better with each passing day. He felt like he had found his soul mate, his one true love. *How did I go on without her?* Jaggedtail questioned. He could also see the way that Cherrypool looked at Mosskit, Jaggedtail would go play with her often and most times Cherrypool would come with. *I'm pretty sure that Cherrypool wants kits.* Jaggedtail thought. *I just don't know if I'm ready.*

Jaggedtail spent his day on a patrol and going out on two hunting sessions, when he returned from his second patrol he had caught three very plump squirrels and two mice. He dropped his catch on the fresh-kill pile and noticed that Daisyfern was padding towards him. He lifted his head to face the deputy, wondering what she had to say.

"Hello, Jaggedtail." Daisyfern dipped her head kindly. "That's a very impressive catch."

Jaggedtail held his head high at the deputy's praise. "Thank you." He mewed. "Did you need something."

"Yes, actually. I already told Elmheart but you and him are doing the night guard tonight, just thought I would let you know as well." Daisyfern explained.

"Alright." Jaggedtail dipped his head, he hated being on the overnight watch but at least he would be with Elmheart, perhaps it wouldn't be so bad. Jaggedtail decided that he should get a few moments of sleep before his long night.

Jaggedtail stretched out in front of the warrior den, his nap had done him well and he was prepared for the night ahead of him. Elmheart had napped in the nursery with Maplepool and Mosskit and the two friends met up in camp. The sky was dark and most of the Clan had retreated to their dens for the night, the ones that didn't would be there soon.

"You ready for tonight?" Jaggedtail questioned Elmheart.

"Oh yeah." Elmheart chuckled. "It's going to be a long night, just like our vigil."

"At least this time we can talk." Jaggedtail mewed, flicking his tail in amusement.

Soon enough, all of LichenClan was sleeping peacefully and it was just Jaggedtail and Elmheart awake. They sat side by side at the camp entrance watching the forest. "How's Mosskit today?" Jaggedtail asked, he hadn't been able to visit Mosskit today.

"She's starting to play, despite still being pretty wobbly." Elmheart chuckled. "But I can tell she's going to be a quick learner, but maybe I'm biased."

"I haven't had a chance to ask you yet," Jaggedtail mewed. "What's it like being a father?" He questioned. "I know you were worried about it, but you seem to be a natural."

"It's honestly the greatest feeling in the world." Elmheart cast his amber eyes upwards towards the stars of Silverpelt. "I never thought it could feel like this, from the moment I first looked at Mosskit, I knew I loved her. It was like this...overwhelming sense of protection

overwhelmed me. I would die for that little kit, she's everything I didn't know I needed."

"Wow." Jaggedtail looked up towards the sky as well.

"I can see how Cherrypool looks around Mosskit, I can tell she wants kits." Elmheart mewed, pulling Jaggedtail's attention back. "Are you two going to have kits?"

"Some day, I think." Jaggedtail mewed, shuffling his paws slightly. "I want what you have, but I just don't know if I'm ready."

"It doesn't matter if you're ready or not." Elmheart mewed, his tone growing serious. "When the time comes, when you look at your kits for the first time you'll have to be ready. You'll see those little kits, so weak and helpless. They'll be dependant on Cherrypool to survive, but they'll be dependant on your for protection. Mosskit can't protect herself right now, but you bet your tail I would protect her until the bitter end. Becoming a father has changed everything I thought I knew, and it will do the same for you, if that's what you want." Elmheart met Jaggedtail's gaze. "My father didn't like me because he didn't want to be a father, I did and if you do then you'll be able to do it."

Jaggedtail held the silent moment for a while, he was honestly surprised at how mature Elmheart had sounded. Becoming a father really had changed him, he had something to fight for, something to live for. Little Mosskit depended only on him and Maplepool, no matter how much Jaggedtail loved Mosskit it wouldn't be the same as having his own kits. *Maybe I am ready.* Jaggedtail thought, the thought of having his own little kits excited him. *I'll have to talk to Cherrypool.*

"Thank you Elmheart." Jaggedtail dipped his head. "I needed to hear that, I suppose whenever Cherrypool and I think we're ready we will have kits. I really do care about her, she makes me so happy." "I'm glad." Elmheart purred, giving Jaggedtail a playful nudge. "It's about time you finally got yourself a mate."

"Oh quiet you." Jaggedtail nudged Elmheart back and the two continued their watch. They sat in the same spot that night, talking

and keeping an eye out on their territory. It seemed like a nearly perfect and easy watch, until Jaggedtail heard movement in the trees.

He strained his ears and stood up, holding his tail up to keep Elmheart silent. Elmheart quickly caught on and stood up as well. Jaggedtail heard almost silent pawsteps in the trees, along with whispering. The fur on his spine rose, and although he couldn't make out any words he could tell that whoever these cats were didn't belong in LichenClan territory.

Jaggedtail opened his jaws to call out the invaders, but before he could get any words out a large group of cats swarmed into camp and Jaggedtail was slammed to the ground by a black tom. He met a pair of dangerous yellow eyes as sharp claws ripped into his pelt. The smell of heather and fish was overwhelming, he was fighting Shadowpelt and MoonClan was invading.

"Fish-breath!" Jaggedtail hissed and sank his teeth into Shadowpelt's shoulder, kicking the large tom in his exposed belly with his hind legs.

"MoonClan is invading! MoonClan is invading!" Elmheart's call rang out from near Jaggedtail as he wrestled with Shadowpelt. For a moment, Shadowpelt was distracted and Jaggedtail shoved the MoonClan warrior off. Jaggedtail jumped to his paws and raked his claws down Shadowpelt's side, blood welling to the surface of his black pelt.

In an instant, LichenClan warriors were out of their dens to meet the MoonClan warriors. Jaggedtail faced Shadowpelt as the warrior finally recovered, Shadowpelt shot forward like a snake and collided into Jaggedtail in a flurry of teeth and claws. Jaggedtail felt his claws ripping into Shadowpelt's fur, while Shadowpelt's teeth sank into Jaggedtail's foreleg.

Jaggedtail ripped away from Shadowpelt, clenching his jaw and ignoring the pain. Jaggedtail swiped forward, his paw hitting Shadowpelt in the side of the head and knocking him to the ground.

Shadowpelt was dazed as he fell, Jaggedtail raised his forepaw and

brought it down hard into Shadowpelt's chest, the tom let out a sharp exhale of breath and hissed in pain. The tom writhed in pain on the ground for a moment before scrambling to his paws and running away from Jaggedtail. *Stupid tom.* Jaggedtail thought crossly before looking to Elmheart.

Elmheart wrestled with Cinderclaw, a large gray she-cat. Cinderclaw was bleeding from a deep wound above her eye, her gray fur splattered with splashes of blood but from looking at Elmheart, Jaggedtail could see that it was mostly hers. *Elmheart can hold his own.* Jaggedtail thought, he needed to find someone else who needed help.

Sunstorm was fighting against Driftwater, the MoonClan warrior had a large, bloody tear in his ear and looked exhausted while Sunstorm still had a fire burning in his eyes. Twigpaw fought alongside Hazelshine, the two of them taking on Stonefoot. Twigpaw had a deep bite wound on her hind leg, but the apprentice was still holding strong.

Then Jaggedtail heard a familiar hiss of pain, he saw Hareclaw facing off against Thorntalon, this was the cat who had tried stealing herbs and who had scarred Elmheart's face. Hareclaw had long claw wounds down his side, the entirety of his flank was covered with blood and his green eyes were cloudy. *No!* Jaggedtail sprinted towards his hold mentor and slammed his body into Thorntalon's, sending the violent warrior to the ground.

Jaggedtail hissed with fury and tore at the tabby's pale fur. Thorntalon roared with anger and lashed out at Jaggedtail, his razor sharp claws ripping into Jaggedtail's flesh. He could feel blood pouring down his chest but it didn't stop him. Jaggedtail sank his claws into Thorntalon's shoulder, he could taste the toms blood and felt his body thrash beneath his own.

Jaggedtail felt a different pair of claws pierce his shoulder and rip him off of Thorntalon, Jaggedtail was thrown to the side before he could react and rolled through the dust on the floor. He quickly jumped to his paws and faced his new attacker, it was the ginger she-cat Squirrelpelt. Jaggedtail hissed at her and swiped forward, she dodged his attack but he also noticed Thorntalon getting back

on his paws, blood pouring from the wound on his shoulder.

Both Thorntalon and Squirrelpelt rushed Jaggedtail, he braced himself for the attack as he was tackled to the ground. Claws and teeth ripped into his pelt and pain crossed his entire body, burning like fire. He hissed and spat, Squirrelpelt pinned his forelegs to the ground as Thorntalon raked his claws down Jaggedtail's back.

Jaggedtail cried out in pain and struggled to get free, he saw a flash of light brown fur as Hareclaw rushed in and pulled Squirrelpelt away, raking his claws down her face. Squirrelpelt yowled sharply in pain and Thorntalon stopped attacking Jaggedtail to defend Squirrelpelt. Jaggedtail's entire body hurt, but he forced himself back up to his paws.

"Stupid old tom!" Thorntalon howled and raised his paw, Hareclaw couldn't defend himself in time and Thorntalon swiped down on Hareclaw, ripping his claws through the tom's chest and sending him stumbling to the ground.

"Hareclaw!" Jaggedtail cried for his old mentor and ran to his side, Hareclaw had lost so much blood, his fur dark and sticky.

"We're done here." Squirrelpelt spat. "Come on, Thorntalon." Thorntalon leaned on Squirrelpelt and limped away, the fight was still going on but Jaggedtail was focused on Hareclaw.

"Thank you, Jaggedtail." Hareclaw choked out in pain. "You've turned into such a great warrior." The old tom's eyes were glassy and his breathing was slow, Jaggedtail felt his heart twist in a knot.

"Come on, Hareclaw." Jaggedtail tried to nudge Hareclaw to his paws but the tom let out hiss of pain.

"I can't move." Hareclaw breathed out. "It hurts too much, please just leave me here. If this is the end for me then so be it...but please..." Hareclaw looked up at Jaggedtail with pleading eyes. "Go and defend LichenClan, for me."

It felt so wrong to leave Hareclaw here, but he knew that his mentor was right. "I'll come back for you." Jaggedtail touched his

muzzle to Hareclaw's. "Thank you for everything you've done for me, Hareclaw." He didn't want to say goodbye, but he had to let Hareclaw know this if he died.

Jaggedtail turned away and started running back into the battle. *Hareclaw's chances of survival are slim.* He thought. *This battle needs to end!* The fight was coming from a single source, Cloudstar, and she needed to be stopped. Jaggedtail ran forward without looking, trying to spot the MoonClan leader. His paws collided with something soft and Jaggedtail tripped over a large form on the ground, he stumbled forward but caught himself. He looked to see what he had tripped on and saw the body of the MoonClan warrior Whiteriver.

Jaggedtail's heart sunk. *Cloudstar is causing the death of her own warriors as well as ours.* He thought sickeningly. *A cat like that shouldn't be leader!* Jaggedtail looked through the frey of fighting and bloodied warriors, he spotted the body of another MoonClan warrior, Windsong, and several more with severe wounds as well as LichenClan warriors with terrible injuries.

"Jaggedtail!" Jaggedtail heard Elmheart's call and turned to see his friend rushing towards him. "Have you been to the nursery? Is Maplepool okay?"

"I haven't been there but I doubt MoonClan warriors would stoop so low as to injure a kit." Jaggedtail squinted through the battle, he could see fighting outside the nursery. It was Badgerstrike and Gingerdust fought with little to no wounds. "She's safe, Elmheart, we need to find Cloudstar and put an end to this."

"You're right," Elmheart nodded. "Let's go." The two friends broke through the battle in search of Cloudstar.

"There!" Elmheart stopped Jaggedtail and motioned towards the edge of camp. Daisyfern and Jumpstar were facing Cloudstar and Ivystone. Daisyfern bled from a deep wound in her side and Ivystone had deep claw marks across her muzzle. The leaders were a different story, they were splattered with blood and engaged in a deep fight.

Jumpstar and Cloudstar charged towards each other, Jumpstar pinned Cloudstar to the ground and raked his claws down her belly. Cloudstar's muzzle shot forward and sank her teeth into Jumpstar's throat. Jaggedtail and Elmheart ran forward to assist their leader, both Daisyfern and Ivystone had stopped fighting and turned to their leaders.

Both of the leader's bodies went limp, Daisyfern pulled Jumpstar's body off Cloudstar and quickly started fussing over her father while Ivystone did the same thing for Cloudstar. Jaggedtail and Elmheart arrived to face the leaders, it was clear that both of them were losing a life.

"Oh, Cloudstar..." Ivystone whimpered. "Why didn't you listen..."

"Cloudstar isn't the only death for MoonClan tonight." Jaggedtail mewed, not trying to sound malicious but Ivystone needed to know. "I've seen the bodies of Whiteriver and Windsong as well, and you've probably killed at least one LichenClan warrior. Is this what Cloudstar wanted?"

Ivystone just stared blankly down at Cloudstar. After what seemed like an eternity, both leaders began to stir. Jumpstar sat up first, but Cloudstar followed soon after. Cloudstar seemed instantly ready to fight but Ivystone jumped in her way. "Cloudstar this *has* to stop!" Ivystone cried. "Our warriors are dying!"

Cloudstar hissed at Ivystone. "I am your leader, you do what I say!" Cloudstar's eyes travelled to Elmheart, and filled with pure rage but Elmheart stood his ground. "It's *you.*" She unsheated her claws, ready to fight. Jaggedtail knew that a leader who had just lost a life wouldn't be able to stand against Elmheart, but Elmheart didn't look ready to fight.

"Yes," Elmheart spoke boldly "It's me, and I never formally apologized for killing Blacksky, it was something I did when I was an apprentice and I am here to tell you that I am no longer that cat. I have changed, I have matured and I would never kill another cat."

"You really expect me to believe that?" Cloudstar spat.

"Maybe not, but Blacksky is the only cat I have ever killed, yet tonight you took one of Jumpstar's lives. What if it had been his last? What about the warriors that your battle has killed, both LichenClan and MoonClan blood has been lost tonight and it is because of *you*, Cloudstar. Blacksky had a family, but now so do I. So if you want to kill me, if you think that will fix everything then go for it. Leave my only daughter without a father, and maybe then you'll finally feel better."

All the cats around Cloudstar and Elmheart were speechless, including Jaggedtail and Cloudstar, were speechless. The MoonClan warrior faced Elmheart, the rage had faded with her eyes and been replaced with confusion and pain. "I'm sorry about killing Blacksksy, but I cannot stand and watch you try and kill my Clanmates and family because of it."

Elmheart spoke with such bravery and maturity. He sounded like a leader. "This battle has to end, Cloudstar. How much more blood must be spilled to end this war? I'm the one who started it and I'm going to be the one who ends it." He stepped forward. "I'm not going to raise my daughter to fight these battles."

Cloudstar bared her teeth. "I will *never* forgive you for killing Blacksky." She lashed her tail. "But as much as I hate to admit it, you are right. Too much blood has been shed, I wanted to make Owlstar proud by continuing his fight, but it's time to end." She turned to Jumpstar. "I apologize for my actions."

Jumpstar narrowed his eyes. "It would be best if you left, Cloudstar."

"MoonClan! Stop the fight!" Cloudstar's voice echoed through the skies. "We are going home!"

As the fighting died down, two more MoonClan bodies were found belonging to Sootmask and Breezeclaw. On the side of LichenClan, Hareclaw had died from his wounds and the body of Skytail was found as well. Both Jaggedtail and Elmheart had found themselves mourning the loss of their mentors, but Cloudstar had left and with any luck this war between LichenClan and MoonClan would be over.

Jaggedtail found Cherrypool after the battle, and she was free of any deadly or serious wounds. He sat with his mate during Hareclaw's vigil, Amberflame, Foxwhisker and Flamewhisker mourned silently. Jaggedtail looked up towards the sky, the sun was slowly starting to rise. The loss of Hareclaw and Skytail was tragic, but what a beautiful sunrise it was to mark the beginning of a new era for LichenClan.

Chapter 29

Jaggedtail gently rasped his tongue over his wounds, they were still sore but they were slowly healing. The worst of his wounds were the bite on his foreleg from Shadowpelt and some nasty claw marks across his flanks from his fight with Squirrelpelt and Thorntalon. He was lucky to get off with only a few bad wounds, he was only slightly restricted from duties and should be fine in just a few days. Some of his Clanmates made away with just a few small wounds, but others were not so.

The worst of the wounds were Twigpaw, Kestrelflame with a deep wound in her shoulder, Ashstream with a deep set of claw marks across her belly and Flamewhisker with a severe wrenched claw and a bite mark on her hind leg. Jumpstar was recovering well from his fatal wound, but the Clan was still slightly shaken up by the battle, especially after the death of Hareclaw and Skytail.

Jaggedtail missed his mentor, he didn't spend nearly as much time with Hareclaw as he did when he was an apprentice, but it just felt strange to not have Hareclaw living with him anymore. He had so much respect for the tom, and the loss was incredibly painful. Despite everything, however, LichenClan was still standing strong and and hopefully, they wouldn't have to face MoonClan again.

Jumpstar did everything he could to keep LichenClan strong and keep morale high, so he made all of the apprentices warriors, naming them Twigheart, Mousethorn, Owlheart and Rabbitwing. Now the apprentice den was empty, and Mosskit was the only kit for the time being. Jaggedtail just wished that naming them warriors would keep spirits high.

Jaggedtail looked up at the sky, it was just before sunset and the gathering was tonight. Jaggedtail hoped that neither Cloudstar or Jumpstar would try and cause an argument. *It's going to take both sides to not start this war back up.* Jaggedtail thought. *Cloudstar may have apologized but tensions are still going to be high.* Jaggedtail sighed, all he could do was hope that they would be able to keep

their peace.

LichenClan arrived in the gathering hollow just after SunClan and AshClan, but MoonClan wasn't long behind them. From the moment that the LichenClan warriors laid eyes on the MoonClan warriors Jaggedtail could feel the tension in the air. AshClan and SunClan seemed to sense it as well, giving questioning glances at the other two Clans. There was one AshClan she-cat, however, that was giving LichenClan a razor sharp glare. *Who is that?* Jaggedtail was pretty sure her name was Ravenfur, but he had no idea why she looked so angry at LichenClan.

"Now that all Clans are here," Foxstar began. "Shall we begin?" The other four leaders agreed and Foxstar began the sharing. "SunClan doesn't have much to report, but prey is running well and we are thriving in greenleaf." With a nod, Foxstar sat down and Goldenstar took his place.

"After a fox attack earlier this moon, we lost Graywillow. It was tragic, but despite this loss AshClan is still standing strong and prey is running well." There was a moment of silence for the lost AshClan warrior. "We have some good news as well, we welcome Crowpaw, Nightpaw, Dustpaw and Batpaw as apprentices." This time, the new apprentices were cheered and Goldenstar sat down, it was Cloudstar's turn next.

"After a battle with LichenClan, MoonClan lost Whiteriver, Windsong, Breezeclaw and Sootmask. It was such a tragic loss, one of my own doing and I have realized that this war Owlstar started needed to be ended." Cloudstar dipped her head, it was quite the treat to see Cloudstar making a public apology.

"Your words mean a lot, Cloudstar." Jumpstar dipped his head. "Hopefully this can be the beginning of a peaceful era for our two Clans. On that note, LichenClan lost two warriors during the battle, Hareclaw and Skytail." There was a moment of silence for the two warriors.

"I'm glad to see your two Clans making amends." Foxstar mewed. "Perhaps all four Clans can share a period of peace."

"I agree." Goldenstar nodded. "But for now, let the Clans talk and share a beautiful, peaceful night." The leaders jumped down and the mingling began. Jaggedtail stood beside Cherrypool as she spoke to a SunClan she-cat named Stormwind, they shared a friendly conversation and Jaggedtail just enjoyed being with Cherrypool.

"Where is Hazelshine?" A very angry voice spoke boldly above all the noise, all the surrounding cats turned to see who was speaking. It was Ravenfur, the black she-cat who had been glaring at LichenClan.

Cherrypool tensed beside Jaggedtail as she heard the mention of her mother. From within the crowd of LichenClan cats, Hazelshine stepped forward to look at Ravenfur, she seemed incredibly confused. Before Ravenfur continued to speak, Mousetail of AshClan ran up to her.

"Ravenfur, I told you that you didn't need to do this." Mousetail mewed, sounding slightly annoyed.

At the sight of Mousetail, Hazelshine's entire body stiffened. *What's going on?* Jaggedtail wondered. "I need to do this Mousetail." Ravenfur lashed her tail. "No more secrets, not from you or from *her*."

"Is there a reason for you being here?" Cherrypool took a step forward, giving Ravenfur a very hostile glare. "If you're just here to start a fight I suggest you leave."

"I'm not starting any fights." Ravenfur hissed. "But I feel like all of AshClan should know just what Hazelshine did, maybe you should know the truth about your mother."

"I know the truth." Cherrypool flicked her tail. "And I don't care."

"Maybe you do but your Clanmates don't."

"What are you trying to say?" Jaggedtail stepped forward, as he spoke he noticed Cherrypool tense again.

"I am Mousetail's mate, but as I learned recently I wasn't his first. Hazelshine was, and this cat before me is half-AshClan." Every

single cat around Hazelshine gasped, pain burned deeply in Hazelshine's eyes but she stood her ground. Jaggedtail couldn't believe what he was hearing. *Hazelshine never said who Cherrypool or Applepaw's father was, I just assumed he was a LichenClan warrior.*

"Hazelshine?" A concerned mew spoke from the crowd as Jumpstar stepped forward."Is this true?"

Hazelshine didn't take her eyes off Mousetail, Jaggedtail noticed that more and more cats were stepping forward to listen to the conversation, from all Clans. "Yes." Hazelshine's voice was dry. She sighed and turned towards Jumpstar. "I know I broke the warrior code but I was a stupid, young warrior. We both were, and we fell fast and hard in love. We didn't think about what we were doing, and when I learned I was expecting kits everything changed."

Mousetail didn't speak, he just stared blankly at Hazelshine. "I told Mousetail that if he didn't want anything to do with my kits then that was fine, I would raise them alone and that's exactly what I did. I don't blame Mousetail for anything, and I never held it against him. I completely understood, neither of us wanted our Clans to find out I just couldn't turn away from them. I raised Cherrypool and Applepaw to the best of my ability. Applepaw's death was devastating but I still have my Cherrypool, my beautiful daughter who helped me get through this." Hazelshine looked at Cherrypool with love flooding into her amber eyes. "Cherrypool is my rock, she's what keeps me stable."

Hazelshine turned back to Ravenfur and Mousetail. "I don't know why you thought the need to do this, Ravenfur." Hazelshine spoke firmly. "I feel nothing for Mousetail anymore, the only love I have is for my kits. I always wanted Mousetail to find a new mate and have kits of his own, so he could feel the love that I did for mine." She turned directly to Mousetail. "I told you I wouldn't be mad at your choice, and that's still true. I raised these kits alone and they've taught me so much, I'm sorry that this had to be exposed but since it has been, I just want every single cat to hear this:

"You can judge me and Mousetail all you want, but I have no regrets in my life. I had two beautiful daughters and though one of them is in StarClan, she is still here in my heart. I am proud of my

kits, as Cherrypool has become an extraordinary warrior. Go live your life, Mousetail, you as well Ravenfur all I ask is that you leave me and my daughter alone." Hazelshine dipped her head then faced Jumpstar. "I'm going home, if you want to punish me then I'll face it in LichenClan camp." Without another word, Hazelshine left the gathering hollow, and Cherrypool ran forward to Jumpstar.

"You can't punish her!" She cried. "It was *moons* ago!"

"I'll discuss this with Hazelshine at camp, I suggest that we take our leave, LichenClan." Many eyes burned into the pelts of LichenClan warriors, Jaggedtail was just completely flabbergasted by everything that has just went down. Cherrypool looked over her shoulder, locking eyes with Jaggedtail as they filled with pain. *So Cherrypool is half AshClan.* Jaggedtail thought.

Cherrypool turned away from Jaggedtail and sprinted after her mother. Jaggedtail wanted to chase after her, but he could tell that she was upset. *It doesn't matter that Cherrypool is half-Clan.* Jaggedtail thought. *And Hazelshine shouldn't be punished either.* He had to make sure that Cherrypool knew that he wasn't bothered by that, he wasn't going to let anything take her away.

By the time LichenClan returned to their camp, news of Hazelshine's affair has spread throughout the entire Clan. Many whispers were shared about Hazelshine and Cherrypool, and Jaggedtail felt the urge to claw anyone who spoke bad about either of them. As Jaggedtail walked, Elmheart fell in beside him. "So that's pretty craze about Hazelshine." Jaggedtail didn't respond. "What do you think about it? About Cherrypool?"

Jaggedtail stopped, turning to Elmheart. The fur on his spine stood up. "Why would it change anything about how I feel about Cherrypool? It wasn't her choice to be born half-Clan and I still care about her all the same and if anyone tries to make her feel bad because of it they'll have me to answer to, and that includes you."

Without giving Elmheart a chance to respond, Jaggedtail stormed forward. He wasn't in the mood to listen to anyone talk about the cat he cared about so much. *I need to make sure she's okay.* He stepped into camp where Hazelshine and Cherrypool were sitting

close beside each other. Hazelshine lifted her head as the Clan entered the camp, Cherrypool whispered something to her mother before Hazelshine stood up.

"Well, Jumpstar." Hazelshine mewed, she stood tall but Jaggedtail could see the terror in her eyes. *Don't punish her, Jumpstar.* Jaggedtail thought, he didn't know if he would be able to stand by that.

"Hazelshine, you made a mistake as a young warrior. This mistake, however, brought LichenClan two incredible cats. Applepaw died too young, but Cherrypool is such a noble and skilled warrior. I'm not going to punish you, Hazelshine. I believed you already learned your lesson, I'm sorry if I made you feel that way. You are an incredible warrior and mother Hazelshine, and I am proud to call you one of my Clanmates."

Relief flooded Hazelshine's face and she dipped her head. "Thank you so much, Jumpstar."

"As for the rest of you," Jumpstar turned to his Clan. "If I hear any cat speaking ill of these two she-cats you *will* be punished. We respect our Clanmates in LichenClan."

Cherrypool ran back up to her mother and nuzzled her lovingly. As the crowd dissipated, Jaggedtail padded up to Cherrypool and Hazelshine. Cherrypool spotted Jaggedtail approaching her and avoided his gaze, staring at his paws.

"Go talk to him," Hazelshine nudged Cherrypool, mewing quietly into her ear.

Cherrypool nodded slowly then faced Jaggedtail. "Come on then." They walked out of camp together to have some privacy, Jaggedtail could see just how scared she was. Once they were alone, Cherrypool sighed. "So, go ahead. Tell me what you really think about me being half-Clan."
"Cherrypool," Jaggedtail stepped forward. "I don't care that you're half AshClan, it doesn't change how I feel about you." Cherrypool slowly lifted her head. "You could be half MoonClan, AshClan, kittypet, rogue or even badger and I'd still feel this way."

Cherrypool let out a small exhaule of laughter. Jaggedtail stepped forward, nudging her chin upward and nuzzling Cherrypool. He breathed in her sweet scent, making his heart race. *I don't want to lose her.* "Cherrypool, I love you."

Cherrypool looked at Jaggedtail, her eyes flooding with emotions. "Oh Jaggedtail...I love you too." She fell against Jaggedtail and he pressed against her getting as close as he possibly could. Jaggedtail had truly found the cat he loved, the cat he wanted to spend the rest of his life with. *It doesn't matter who her parents are, or what Clan they're from. Cherrypool is Cherrypool, and she is the love of my life.*

Chapter 30

"Great catch!" Jaggedtail praised Elmheart as he caught a sparrow just as it began to take off from the ground.

Elmheart set the bird down and faced Jaggedtail with a confident expression. "Thanks." He beamed. "It's been a while since I've had a bird to eat, but I think Mosskit would enjoy it." Elmheart's eyes sparkled at the mention of his daughter.

"Well we should get back to camp then," Jaggedtail mewed. "I'm sure both her and Maplepool are pretty hungry. Elmheart agreed and the two of them rounded up their catch. Jaggedtail had caught two squirrels, two mice and a vole and along with his sparrow, Elmheart had caught three squirrels and two shrews. They prey was certainly plentiful, it had practically been jumping into their paws.

They returned to camp and dropped their catch on the fresh-kill pile which was nearly overflowing with prey. Jaggedtail followed Elmheart to the nursery to talk to his niece and sister. They spotted Mosskit playing with Maplepool at the nursery entrance. Mosskit jumped all over her mother, biting at her ears and swiping at her tail. Maplepool looked completely exhausted, but there was still love burning deep within her green eyes.

"How are my two favorite she-cats?" Elmheart mewed as he approached, setting his sparrow down.

"Elmheart!" Mosskit squeaked and leapt off of her mother, running towards Elmheart. She circled around his paws, rubbing up against his legs, Elmheart purred loudly. She then noticed the sparrow. "Is this for me?" She prodded the bird with her tiny paw.

"For you and your mother yes." Elmheart purred. "You've never had a bird before, and sparrow is one of my favorites."
"Yummy! I can't wait!" Mosskit then looked up at Jaggedtail. "Did you catch anything cool like a bird?"

"No, unfortunately I'm not as cool as your father." Jaggedtail shot a playful glance at Elmheart who just rolled his eyes but laughed as well.

"Well duh," Mosskit spoke confidently. "No one is as cool as my father! He's the greatest warrior in all the forest!" Mosskit held her head high as she spoke about her father, Jaggedtail couldn't help but purr at Mosskit. *Mosskit really idolizes Elmheart.* Jaggedtail thought, and once again found himself longing for a kit to look at him that way. *Elmheart is Mosskit's whole word, he's her hero. I want that.*

"I'll leave you guys be." Jaggedtail dipped his head. "I'm going to go find, Cherrypool."

"I think I saw her leaving the medicine cat den." Maplepool mewed, stretching out her forelegs.

"What?" Jaggedtail felt anxiety creep into his heart. "Why was she in there? Is something wrong?"
"That's a question for Cherrypool, not me." Maplepool yawned. "Go find her, mouse-brain."
Jaggedtail swiftly turned away from Maplepool and began searching for his mate, it had been two moons since Hazelshine's affair had been announced and Jaggedtail told Cherrypool that he loved her and ever since they had been as close as ever. Jaggedtail scanned the camp for her ginger tabby pelt, finally spotting her picking through the fresh-kill pile. Jaggedtail quickly crossed the Clan to go talk to her.

"There you are." Jaggedtail mewed frantically. "Are you alright? Maplepool told me she saw you in the medicine cat den." Cherrypool purred. "Yes, Jaggedtail I'm fine." She nuzzled his cheek. "But I have something to tell you."

"What is it?" Jaggedtail thought, forcing himself to calm down after the scare. He didn't know what he would do without Cherrypool and the thought of it terrified him.

"Come sit with me." Cherrypool purred and picked up a mouse, walking towards the clearing near the warriors' den, she waved her

tail. Jaggedtail felt dizzy watching her, he always did. She made his heart turn flips in his chest. Jaggedtail followed Cherrypool and sat down beside her.

"I was in the medicine cat den for a reason, but it wasn't a bad one. Far from it, actually." Cherrypool met Jaggedtail's gaze, looking at him expectantly.

"Am I supposed to know something?" Jaggedtail questioned, feeling confused.

Cherrypool laughed. "Honestly, Jaggedtail I didn't think I would have to spell it out for you." She looked at him lovingly. "Jaggedtail, I'm expecting kits."

Jaggedtail's jaw dropped. "You are?" So many emotions crashed into Jaggedtail's heart, fear, love, excitement and many more. Jaggedtail jumped to his paws. "Oh, Cherrypool I'm so excited!" He exclaimed, nuzzling every inch of her pelt. "I've been wanting this for so long." "Me too." Cherrypool breathed out, nuzzling into Jaggedtail's neck. "We'll finally have a family of our own."

Jaggedtail stepped back and looked over Cherrypool, she looked even more beautiful than usual. *She's going to be the mother of my kits.* Jaggedtail thought, warmth spreading throughout his entire body. *I wouldn't want it to be anyone else.* "I have to go tell my family, and Hazelshine too!"

"Then let's go!" Cherrypool chripped excitedly and stood up, she ate her mouse quickly and the two of them returned to the nursery.

"You two look happy." Elmheart mewed, he was now resting beside Maplepool while Mosskit ate a small piece of the sparrow.

"We're going to have kits." Jaggedtail mewed proudly.

"Congratulations!" Maplepool purred, standing up and going over to Jaggedtail and Cherrypool. "I'm so happy for you two."

"Thank you." Cherrypool dipped her head. "I'm so excited, but I'm nervous as well."

"So was I." Maplepool assured her. "But once you see your kits it will come so natural to you, and I'll be here to help." Cherrypool looked incredibly grateful, Jaggedtail looked past Maplepool at Elmheart who looked at Jaggedtail with an affectionate gaze.

"Well it's about time, I'm sure the whole Clan has been wondering when you two were going to have some kits of your own." Elmheart teased. Jaggedtail's pelt burned slightly but he just rolled his eyes.

"Does this mean I'm going to have some more kits to play with?" Mosskit questioned with a mouthful of sparrow.

"I don't know, Mosskit." Cherrypool replied. "You'll be five moons old by the time that my kits are born, and kits don't do much playing their first moon of life."

"Hmph." Mosskit lashed her tail. "Well when I'm not doing any apprentices duties and they're old enough I'm going to come and play with them!" Mosskit declared before returning to her meal.

"Sometimes I wished she had some siblings." Maplepool mewed with a sigh. "She would have someone else to play with, don't get me wrong I love Mosskit and it seems almost impossible to love any other kits as much as I love her, but sibling bonds and so strong." Maplepool looked to Jaggedtail who agreed. Jaggedtail got through a lot of issues because of Maplepool, and of course Elmheart who he considered a brother.

"She'll make friends I'm sure." Cherrypool purred. "Once our kits are old enough I'm sure they'll be like siblings, just like Elmheart and Jaggedtail."

"I hope so." Maplepool purred. "She's very excited to become an apprentice."
"Weren't we all." Jaggedtail chuckled.

"I'm sorry, Sagefeather." Jaggedtail heard another voice speaking from the medicine cat den, he turned and saw Stormsong facing Sagefeather. Stormsong's head was dropped low and Sagefeather had a shocked and pained expression on her face. "But I've had a lot of time to think about this, and I know that this is what I want. I'm

sorry for wasting so much of your time."
Jaggedtail shared a confused expression with Cherrypool and Maplepool. "Oh, Stormsong..." Sagefeather sighed. "You didn't waste my time, having you as my apprentice has been the best time of my life. I understand your choice, and I respect it it just...hurts."

"What's going on?" Cherrypool leaned in and asked Jaggedtail quietly.

"I don't know." Jaggedtail replied, it looked like Stormsong was stepping down, but why?

"I need to go tell, Jumpstar." Stormsong mewed, wincing like she was in pain. "The whole Clan is going to hate me."

"No cat is going to hate you, Stormsong." Sagefeather rested her tail on Stormsong's tail. "I know that I don't, all I want is your happiness."

"Thank you, Sagefeather." Stormsong looked at her mentor gratefully. "I won't forget all that you've done for me." Stormsong turned away and left Sagefeather looking sad and lost. All three cats' eyes followed Stormsong as she went to Jumpstar who was sharing prey with Daisyfern and Shorttail. The medicine cat approached them, shuffling her paws and looking incredibly scared.

"Is Stormsong stepping down from being medicine cat?" Maplepool questioned. "Why would she do that? I thought Stormsong loved being a medicine cat."

Jaggedtail couldn't answer, he just watched Stormsong talk to Jumpstar who nodded slowly. After a few moments, Jumpstar stood up and jumped onto the High Stump. "Let all cats old enough to catch their own prey gather around the High Stump for a Clan meeting." His voice rang out, Jaggedtail, Maplepool and Cherrypool went to gather while Elmheart stayed with Mosskit who desperately wanted to attend as well.

"I've called you because Stormsong has made an incredibly difficult decision, I can't tell you her reasoning so I will let her explain." Jumpstar mewed, dipping his head while Stormsong stepped

forward. Her blue eyes filled with fear and Jaggedtail could see that she was trembling.

"After thinking about it for a long time," Stormsong began, her voice very unsteady. "I've decided to step down from my position as medicine cat and become a warrior."

Gasps spread throughout the entire Clan, Jaggedtail struggled to understand. "But why?" Badgerstrike, Stormsong's brother, spoke up. "I always thought you loved being a medicine cat? Why step down?"

"Because I've fallen in love, and I don't want to break the rules." Jaggedtail's jaw dropped slightly. *That's why?* Stormsong's eyes rested on a particular tom in the crowd, it was Timberfall. He looked at Stormsong with loving and supportive eyes. "The entire time I've been a medicine cat I've had to watch other queens give birth and build families, which is something I never realized I wanted. I can't live like this anymore, so while I love being a medicine cat I just can't break the rules. I'm so sorry to all the cats I am letting down." Stormsong bowed her head, this was clearly very hard for her.

Jaggedtail supposed he never really had to think about *not* having a family. It was always an option for him, but if someone told him that he couldn't be with Cherrypool or not have a family then it would destroy him.

"You're not letting anyone down, Stormsong." It was Hazelshine who spoke up this time. "No one in LichenClan will hate you, even if you think they will. Trust me." Cherrypool leaned slightly against Jaggedtail. *If anyone understands what Stormsong is going through, it's Hazelshine.* "But this is better than hiding everything, and I know I will support you."

"Thank you." Stormsong's voice trembled.

"Since you are switching to a warrior," Jumpstar spoke up. "You will need to take the warrior's oath."

Stormsong turned to face her leader. "Right." She didn't seem very

ready, but Jaggedtail hoped that Stormsong would be alright. She didn't have nearly as much hunting or fighting practice as the other warriors, but if Timberfall really loved her then he would be able to help her and support her, Jaggedtail knew he would do anything for Cherrypool.

"Stormsong, do you promise to uphold the warrior code and defend the Clan even at the cost of your life?" Jumpstar questioned.

"I do."

"Then by the powers of StarClan I welcome you as a full warrior of LichenClan, though you have left your life of a medicine cat behind, I know you will be able to lend your skills, both with medicine and with your claws to LichenClan's benefit."

Jaggedtail nodded along with Jumpstar's words, just because Stormsong wouldn't be a medicine cat anymore didn't mean she would be losing all of her skills and knowledge. *If Sagefeather really needs help, then Stormsong can help.* The meeting ended and Stormsong met up with Timberfall, nuzzling the pale brown warrior while Hazelshine gave her words of encouragement.

"Hopefully Sagefeather will be able to find a new apprentice soon." Maplepool mewed. "While she is healthy, she is far from young and training an apprentice takes time. I know Mosskit has no interest in the medicine cat den, so she will have to wait for another cat."

Jaggedtail hadn't thought about that, Sagefeather was certainly showing her age with white fur lining her long gray pelt. "Perhaps one of our kits will want to be a medicine cat?" Jaggedtail mewed towards Cherrypool.

"Maybe." Cherrypool nodded. "Either way, I know that LichenClan will be alright, so will Sagefeather. She's still got many moons on her." Jaggedtail agreed, but he didn't want to worry about the future of LichenClan's medicine cats, the only thing he wanted to focus on was *his* future, and his kits.

Chapter 31

Jaggedtail carried the vole he had just caught across camp towards the nursery where his mate would be resting. With each passing day, Jaggedtail grew more and more excited to meet his kits, and it would be happening any day now. It had been two moons since Cherrypool told him, and her belly was round with kits. Sagefeather predicted that she would be having more than one, which brought Jaggedtail such joy.

He poked his head into the nursery where the three queens were. Maplepool was watching Mosskit play with a feather and Cherrypool was having a conversation with Stormsong. Stormsong has moved into the nursery about a half-moon after stepping down from her position as medicine cat, it had been a shock to the Clan but they had all adjusted and soon the nursery would be filled to the brim with kits.

"Hey beautiful." Jaggedtail purred as he set down the vole, resting his muzzle on Cherrypool's forehead.

"Hi there." She purred. "Thank you for the vole, but I'm not very hungry." She looked at it distratefully. "These kits won't let me eat anything." She laughed and heaved herself up. "Let's step outside, I need some fresh-air." Jaggedtail let Cherrypool lean on him as they stepped out into the camp. "I feel so restless lately." Cherrypool breathed out with a sigh. "I just want these little kits out already." She laughed.

"Me too." Jaggedtail nuzzle Cherrypool's round belly. "Not only do I not like seeing you struggle but I'm so excited to meet our little kits."

"They will come in time," Cherrypool nodded. "For now I just want to enjoy my time with you." Cherrypool fell in against Jaggedtail and their tails intertwined. Jaggedtail got as close as he could to her and two of them enjoyed the cool leaf-fall day.

It was nearly sunset before Cherrypool decided to go back in, Jaggedtail helped her to her paws and began guiding her back to the nursery. Suddenly, Cherrypool let out a sharp hiss of pain and came to a dead stop, her legs shaking. "Oh..." She breathed out.

"What? What's wrong?" Jaggedtail asked, quickly starting to panic.

"N-nothing...just a little bit of pain." Jaggedtail wasn't convinced, but Cherrypool was. She took a few more steps forward before letting out another hiss of pain. She grit her teeth and dug her claws into the soil beneath her paws. "Okay--maybe it isn't nothing."

"Are the kits coming?" Jaggedtail questioned, giving Cherrypool a sniff. "Maplepool!" He called for his sister, she would know. After a moment, Maplepool stepped outside with Mosskit on her tail.

"What's wrong?" She questioned, looking at Cherrypool with concern.

"I keep getting spasms of pain." As Cherrypool spoke she cried out in pain. "Are the kits coming?"

"More than likely." Maplepool nodded. "I'm going to get Cherrypool back into her nest," She looked up at Jaggedtail. "Go get Sagefeather." Jaggedtail didn't hesitate, he turned on his paws and sprinted towards the medicine cat den. Sagefeather was inside making balls of moss.

"Sagefeather!" Jaggedtail called, skidding to a stop inside of her den.

"My goodness, Jaggedtail where's the fire?" Sagefeather looked up with a flick of her tail.

"Cherrypool is about to give birth." Jaggedtail explained rapidly.

Sagefeather nodded. "Alright then," The old medicine cat stood up and moved over to her herb store, selecting a few herbs and a stick. "Take this stick to Cherrypool, it will give her something to bite down on to help with the pain." Sagefeather looked Jaggedtail in the eyes. "I hope you're ready to be a father."

"I am." Jaggedtail declared, picking up the stick that Sagefeather had given him. The two cats rushed to the medicine cat den where Stormsong had started to soothe Cherrypool while Maplepool kept Mosskit occupied.

"I'd love to be in there with her, but I don't want anyone tripping over Mosskit." Maplepool explained as Jaggedtail entered the nursery. He didn't mind, he was just glad that Cherrypool had so much help.

"Here you go my love." Jaggedtail nudged the stick towards Cherrypool who looked at it in confusion.

"What's that for?" Cherrypool questioned.

"You'll bite down on it." Sagefeather explained, preparing for the kitting. "It will help with the pain." She placed a paw on the queen's belly. "Oh yes, it's time."

Cherrypool took several deep breaths while Jaggedtail rasped his tongue over her ears, whispering comforting words to her. "You can do this, sweetness." He purred.

"I'm so glad you're here." Cherrypool mewed. "I'm so excited to meet our kits."
"It won't be long now, Cherrypool. You're going to start feeling some extreme pain, it's completely normal." Sagefeather explained.

As Sagefeather predicted, it wasn't long. Cherrypool started yowling with pain several times, Jaggedtail hated seeing her in so much pain but both Stormsong and Sagefeather told him that it was completely natural, he remembered Maplepool doing the same thing when Mosskit was born.

The kitting process was long and grueling, their first kit wasn't born until night time. It fell into the nest beneath Cherrypool and Stormsong rushed to start licking the kit. After only a few licks the kit was crying out for milk. Jaggedtail looked at his first kit, a red-brown tabby. Looking at his kit, Jaggedtail felt a surge of emotion like he had never felt before.

A wave of love and protection unlike anything else washed over him. *This is my kit, so small and helpless.* He thought, and in that moment Jaggedtail knew that he would do anything for his kit, just like Elmheart said. The love he felt for his kit was almost overwhelming, and there were still more on the way.

After a lot more cries of pain, a second kit was born, this one handed to Jaggedtail. Jaggedtail began rapidly lapping at his second kit who was pure ginger. Just as the first born, this kit began crying out instantly.

"I believe that's it, Cherrypool. Two little toms." Sagefeather purred and began working to stop the bleeding.

Jaggedtail stared at his two sons, they were so incredibly perfect that he couldn't take his eyes off of them. "They're so incredible." Jaggedtail breathed out, unable to comprehend the amount of love he felt. "I can't even believe it."

"They're wonderful." Cherrypool purred, staring down at them. Her breathing was heavy and she was clearly exhausted but Jaggedtail could see the love in her eyes. *I have a family.* Jaggedtail thought. *I have a beautiful mate and two incredible sons.* Jaggedtail was at a complete loss for words, everything in his world had changed in this very moment.

"Can I see them now?" Maplepool spoke, poking her head inside the nursery.

"Of course." Cherrypool purred, beckoning Maplepool into the nursery. Maplepool looked down at the two young toms, her eyes flooding with eyes.

"Oh, Jaggedtail they're beautiful." Maplepool gushed. "They're incredible."
"Aren't they?" Cherrypool nuzzle the tabby tom. "I can't stop looking at them."
"You doing okay in there?" Maplepool looked at Jaggedtail. "You seem a little shell shocked."
Jaggedtail blinked. "I just can't get over them, I'm a father now."
"Yes you are." Cherrypool looked up at Jaggedtail, her eyes

shimmering. "And you're going to be a wonderful father."

Jaggedtail purred, resting his chin on top of Cherrypool's head. "You should let her get some rest, Jaggedtail." Maplepool suggested. "And I know that Elmheart is out there waiting for you."

"I'll come visit you later." Jaggedtail promised. "And we can come up with some names for these two."

Jaggedtail didn't want to leave, but he could tell just how exhausted Cherrypool was so he stepped out into the camp, Sagefeather behind him. "What an easy birth." Sagefeather said to herself.

"Thank you, Sagefeather." Jaggedtail dipped his head towards the medicine cat.

"Just doing my job, Jaggedtail." Sagefeather waved her fluffy tail and returned to her den. Jaggedtail looked around, spotting Elmheart trotting up towards him.

"There's the new father." Elmheart mewed happily. "How are the kits?"
"Wonderful." Jaggedtail purred loudly. "Two toms."

"Congratulations, brother." Elmheart stepped forward and nuzzzle Jaggedtail's cheek. "Welcome to the life of fatherhood, it's something else isn't it?"

"It really is." From the moment I looked at them, something inside of me changed. I love those two more than I thought I ever could, and Cherrypool is going to be such a fantastic mother."

"And you'll be a fantastic father." Elmheart encouraged. "Let's eat some prey to celebrate." Together, Jaggedtail and Elmheart padded over to the fresh-kill pile to eat some prey. News of Jaggedtail's kits spread quickly, throughout the day Hazelshine, Fawnsky, Sunstorm and Vinetail all went to go visit the kits and told Jaggedtail how cute they were. His entire life had changed today, and it was completely for the better. This was the beginning of a new era of his life, and he was more than ready for it.

Chapter 32

"I'm gonna get you!" Redkit declared, charging forward clumsily towards his brother. His jump was weak, but he landed on Brackenkit's back, pulling him to the ground. Redkit held his head high and proud at his successful attack on Brackenkit.

"Get of me fuzzball!" Brackenkit squawked, rolling over and pushing Redkit off, he turned and the two toms wrestled in the dust. Jaggedtail purred loudly watching his two sons play, they were so full of life and energy. Jaggedtail watched happily, he could do this all day. The two of them were just over a moon old, but already ready to play and have fun. All they did all day was play and sleep.

Cherrypool had been working hard to keep up with them, but when she needed a break Jaggedtail would let them play in camp while he watched them. The nursery had gone from one kit to five. Stormsong had given birth to her two kits, Branchkit and Barkkit about half a moon ago, her little sons weren't very active but they were starting to find their paws.

Meanwhile Mosskit was nearly an apprentice, in just a few days she would be made an apprentice. Jaggedtail found it so hard to believe that Mosskit was already six moons old, it seemed like just yesterday she was born. Jaggedtail hoped that it wouldn't go by so fast with his sons, he wanted them to stay this small forever. *I could watch them play forever.* Jaggedtail thought happily.

Jaggedtail continued to watch his son's play, and even joined in a few times to let his sons climb all over him and chase his crooked tail. When Cherrypool woke back up, she took the kits back into the nursery so that they could get a nap. Jaggedtail left feeling incredibly happy and satisfied, he loved nothing more than spending time with his kits.

"Hey Jaggedtail." A voice spoke from behind him as he walked to find Daisyfern and try and get himself onto a patrol. He turned around and saw that Elmheart was padding up to him. "Can I ask

you something?"

"What's up?" Jaggedtail questioned.

"I just spoke to Jumpstar so I could ask him something."
"And?"
"Mosskit's apprentice ceremony is in a few days and there's only one cat I want to be her mentor, and that's you." Elmheart explained.

Jaggedtail blinked. "You want me to mentor Mosskit? Isn't family usually not supposed to mentor family?"

"Usually yes, but I spoke to Jumpstar and he said that it was alright as long as you agreed." Elmheart explained, sounding somewhat eager.

"Well then alright," Jaggedtail dipped his head. "I would love to mentor Mosskit."

"Thank you, Jaggedtail." Elmheart dipped his head. "I know that you will train her right."

"Let all cats old enough to catch their own prey gather around the High Stump for a Clan meeting!" Jumpstar's voice rang out from atop the high stump and the Clan began to gather. Maplepool fussed over Mosskit, making sure that her pelt was neat and smooth but Mosskit fought against her mother at every single turn. At long last, Mosskit broke free of Maplepool's grasp and charged towards the Clan meeting.

"Mosskit! Apprentices don't act like this!" Maplepool called and Mosskit skidded to a stop, she rolled her eyes at her mother and walked much calmer towards the meeting. Mosskit took her place in the middle and Jaggedtail sat beside Elmheart who watched his daughter with pride.

"I've called the Clan here today because one of our kits has reached the age of six moons and is ready to become an apprentice." Jumpstar began once the Clan had settled. "Today is a proud day for LichenClan, by naming apprentices we show that we will remain strong for many moons to come. Mosskit, from this day forward

until you have earned your warrior name you will be known as Mosspaw. Your mentor is going to be Jaggedtail, I understand that you are kin but I've been told that he will be the perfect mentor for you, and I have more than enough trust in Jaggedtail to train you everything you need to know."

Jaggedtail stepped forward to face Mosspaw who looked incredibly eager to get started, her green eyes burning bright with excitement. Jaggedtail touched his nose to Mosspaw's and Mosspaw's apprenticeship officially began.

"Mosspaw! Mosspaw!" LichenClan cheered for their new apprentice, and Mosspaw soaked in all of the praise from her Clanmates.

"Let's get started!" Mosspaw declared, running in circles around Jaggedtail. "Are we going to hunt? Train? Patrol?"

"I say we go out hunting first." Jaggedtail decided, it would be nice to get Mosspaw to burn off some energy. Something told Jaggedtail that Mosspaw would be much more energetic than Foxwhisker was as an apprentice, he would definitely have his work cut out for him. Despite that, however, Jaggedtail was excited as this would allow him to make a close relationship with his niece.

With the very eager Mosspaw in tow, Jaggedtail headed out towards the forest. "Where will we be hunting?" Mosspaw questioned, looking around the forest in awe. "I want to see the entire forest!"

"That will come in time, but for now we will be hunting near the camp. There's a good place to catch shrews around here." Jaggedtail explained. "Soon enough you'll know the entirety of LichenClan's territory like you know your own nest."

"What about other territories? Will I ever see the other Clans?" Mosspaw asked curiously.

"Someday maybe." Jaggedtail responded and his mind drifted back many moons ago when he travelled to MoonClan territory and met Crowpaw. He hadn't seen Crowpaw in moons, once again he wondered what happened to the young tom. "When I was just

getting started as an apprentice I went to MoonClan camp so Birdstar could talk to Owlstar."

"I never met Birdstar." Mosspaw flicked her tail. "What was she like?"

"She was amazing, she was very peaceful and wise." Jaggedtail responded, reminiscing about the old LichenClan leader. "She led for a very long time, and she led LichenClan through an era of peace. Jumpstar is a wonderful leader as well though, most LichenClan leaders are incredible after all."

"Do you want to be leader someday?" Mosspaw questioned.

Jaggedtail purred, Mosspaw had countless questions and he didn't mind answering them all. "Maybe, if the time came I wouldn't argue but Jumpstar and Daisyfern will be around for a long time, I'm sure. Right now I just want to focus on being a father."

"I know my father wants to be leader, that would be so cool!" Mosspaw boasted. "Elmheart would be the greatest leader to ever walk this forest!" Jaggedtail couldn't help but laugh, he loved how Mosspaw talked about Elmheart and he hoped his own sons would look at him with the same amount of respect and admiration.

Jaggedtail led Mosspaw to a small clearing in the trees, this would serve as a great place to teach Mosspaw some basic hunting moves. "Okay," He began, facing Mosspaw who was very ready to get started. "First I'll be teaching you how to hunt mice. When it comes to hunting mice the key is to be as silent as possible, both with your breathing and your pawsteps. A mouse will feel the vibrations in the ground before it hears you. So you need to be slow and cautious, the biggest thing you need to know when it comes to hunting is patience. Prey will never just jump into your paws, you need to take the time to catch it. So me your hunting crouch."

"I got this." Mosspaw beamed and crouched down, showing off her hunting crouch. It wasn't terrible for a new apprentice and Jaggedtail knew that Elmheart had been giving her small amounts of training before today. However, it wasn't perfect.

"You're too spread out, you need to keep a tight and close stance so you can put as much power into your pounce as well." Mosspaw followed his advice. "When you leap you'll be putting all the power into your hind legs to get the most out of your jump, but you'll be aiming with your front paws. If you do it right then your paws should land perfectly on top of your prey, then you will kill it with a quick bite."

Mosspaw was listening intently and it seemed that she was taking in every single one of Jaggedtail's words. It was impressive to see a brand new apprentice listen so carefully, especially with how much energy she had built up. "Watch me." Jaggedtail mewed and collected a small stick, placing it on the ground in front of him.

He dropped into a hunter's crouch, making sure it was as good as possible to show Mosspaw the right way to do it. Jaggedtail moved forward slowly and carefully, giving a powerful pounce and landing perfectly on the stick, breaking it in two.

"Wow." Mosspaw breathed out. "I wanna try!" Jaggedtail found another stick for her to practice on and they spent a long time practicing her hunting crouch. It was nearly sunset by the time Mosspaw finally landed on and broke the stick and he had never seen a cat so proud to catch a stick, but he admired it. He wanted Mosspaw to celebrate her achievements, confidence was good to have as a warrior.

Once they returned to camp, Mosspaw went to tell Maplepool and Elmheart all about her first day as an apprentice while Jaggedtail went to go visit Cherrypool and his kits. He was excited to have another apprentice, having an apprentice gave him something to do each day and he was certain that Mosspaw would be very different from Foxwhisker, and he couldn't wait to see how this young she-cat would grow.

Chapter 33

"Oh wow!" Mosspaw exclaimed, her eyes wide with awe. "It's so pretty! Look at all the snow!" She was clearly amazing by all the snow that had fallen overnight. Jaggedtail, however, despised the snow. It was cold, made his paws numb and with snow came the terrible threat of sickness. Last leaf-bare had claimed the life of Birdstar and many others, and this time around they were down a medicine cat.

Not to mention, Jaggedtail's kits were only two moons old and far too young to fight sickness. *We were only two moons old when Robinkit died.* Jaggedtail remembered Elmheart's sister painfully. *I'll do anything to keep my kits safe and healthy.* Jaggedtail withheld a sigh, it was the beginning of a long season and Jaggedtail had to fall into the old habits of keeping his Clan healthy and full.

Thankfully, prey had been running so well from greenleaf through leaf-fall and the fresh-kill pile was fully stocked. Prey wouldn't be an issue for a while, so their only issue would be sickness. *I just have to keep my head high.* Jaggedtail thought, he would be working with Mosspaw nearly every single day and teaching her how to hunt in the cold, she had only been an apprentice for one moon but her hunting skills were sharp, she would be able to manage.

"Let's get going." Jaggedtail urged his apprentice. "We don't want to be out in the cold for too long." With Mosspaw at his side, Jaggedtail set out into the snowy forest. "When you're hunting in snow like this we have a very strong disadvantage. It's harder to scent and you are easier to spot. It's hard having darker pelts in the snow, just as cats with lighter pelts struggle more during the normal seasons."

"So what can I do?" Mosspaw questioned.

"Be extra cautious, keep plenty of space between you and your prey, don't get discouraged if you don't catch it. This is a very difficult time to hunt, even for older warriors like myself."

"How do I track prey? I can barely smell anything over the snow."

"Well, because of the snow you can often track pawprints and eventually you will get better at discerning snow from prey." Jaggedtail explained. "Tracking prints can be difficult, but you'll figure it out. You want to look for fresh prints which will often smell like the prey, also keep an eye out for droppings."

"Ew." Mosspaw wrinkled her nose at the mention of droppings. Jaggedtail laughed at her reaction and continued with the lesson. They set out into the snow covered forest to do some hunting. Mosspaw missed out on a few mice, but in the end she was able to get her paws on two voles which was impressive for a young apprentice like her.

Jaggedtail continued his own hunt and managed to catch three decent sized squirrels, he was grateful that prey was still plentiful enough to keep the Clan hungry. They still ate prey sparingly however, to keep the pile full. As they were walking back to the camp Jaggedtail heard Mosspaw sneeze. His body stiffened and looked over at his apprentice. *Surely she can't be getting sick already?*

"Mosspaw? Are you alright?" He questioned, trying not to panic.

"Yeah it was just a sneeze, Jaggedtail." Mosspaw assured him. "I feel fine."

"I would still feel better if you went to go see Sagefeather, a lot of time whitecough starts off with just a sneeze. It would make me and your parents feel a whole lot better." Jaggedtail urged.

"Fine." She sighed and Jaggedtail walked with her to the medicine cat den. He was grateful that neither Maplepool or Elmheart were in camp, they would quickly begin to panic over it. Jaggedtail wasn't too concerned by a sneeze, but there was still fear in the back of his mind.

Jaggedtail reached the medicine cat den where Sagefeather was looking over Badgerstrike. The black and white tom sat still and listened to what Sagefeather was saying. "Your voice is dry and I definitely think sickness is on the way. I'm going to give you some

honey and chickweed and hopefully it will kick the sickness before it can evolve. I want you to stay in your nest for the next few days and come see me if it gets any worse."

"Will do, thank you, Sagefeather." Bagderstrike ate his herbs and walked past Jaggedtail and Mosspaw.

"Which one of you is it?" Sagefeather mewed while she put away the remaining chickweed.

"Mosspaw sneezed, I know it's probably nothing but I just wanted to make sure we caught it before it got too bad."

"No, you made the right choice, Jaggedtail." Sagefeather beckoned Mosspaw forward and the young apprentice sat down, Jaggedtail watched as Sagefeather examined Mosspaw, it didn't take very long. "It's just a small cold, Mosspaw." Sagefeather explained, allowing Jaggedtail to breathe a sigh of relief. "But colds can get worse, so I'll be giving you some chickweed as well and the same advice as Badgerstrike. Stay in your nest for a few days and tell me if it gets any worse.

"Alright, Sagefeather." Jaggedtail was impressed by Mosspaw's maturity and her quickness to eat the herbs. She made a face at the foul taste but did it nonetheless. "Thank you."

"Go and get some rest now, young one." Mosspaw agreed and left the medicine cat den, presumably to the apprentice den.

"So she should be fine?" Jaggedtail questioned.

Sagefeather nodded. "She is young, but she's strong and healthy. She'll be fine with some rest."

"Have any other cats come forward with sickness?" Jaggedtail questioned curiously.

"Well there's Badgerstrike, and Cedarcloud complained of some sickness. I'm just hoping it stays out of the nursery and elder's den." Jaggedtail agreed with the medicine cat as the elder's den had become more full in the past few moons. Kestrelflame, Poppywing and Cedarcloud had all retired along with Barksong and Dustfang.

"Well, I'm going to see if I can't get on a patrol. Good luck Sagefeather." Jaggedtail dipped his head, the medicine cat waved her tail to show that she heard him. Before he spoke to Daisyfern he figured he would go in a check on his mate and kits. Cherrypool had been keeping them inside out of the cold so Brackenkit, Redkit, Barkkit and Branchkit were all playing while Stormsong and Cherrypool had a conversation.

"Hey there." Jaggedtail greeted kindly.

"Jaggedtail!" Redkit exclaimed and he along with Brackenkit charged towards Jaggedtail excitedly. Redkit did his best to scale up Jaggedtail's legs while Brackenkit batted at his tail. "Where have you been?"
"I was out hunting with Mosspaw." Jaggedtail explained.

"No fair!" Redkit waved his tiny tail. "I want to be an apprentice and go hunting with you!"

"You'll be an apprentice soon." Jaggedtail chuckled. "For now you should just enjoy being a kit, it's cold out there."

"Cherrypool won't let us play in the snow." Brackenkit complained. "It's not *that* cold!"

"Maybe when you're a little bigger you can go play in the snow." Jaggedtail suggested. "It's easy to get sick in this kind of weather and you wouldn't want to have to eat yucky herbs now would you?"

"No." Brackenkit groaned. He assumed his kits understood and bid farewell to them, allowing them to continue their play session, As Jaggedtail left the nursery he closed his eyes and looked up towards the sky. *Please StarClan, spare our Clan this season.*

Chapter 34

Coughing woke Jaggedtail from his deep sleep. He lifted his head and looked around to see where the coughing was coming from. It was near the back of the den, and he spotted Flamewhisker sitting up and coughing loudly. "Are you alright?" Foxwhisker spoke, he had been woken up as well and his eyes showed concern for his sister.

"Yeah I'm--" Her words were cut off by another violent bout of coughing.

"No, you're not." Foxwhisker stood up. "Let's go see Sagefeather." As Flamewhisker stepped into the moonlight Jaggedtail could see that her eyes and nose were streaming. *Another one is sick.* Jaggedtail thought bitterly. This made Flamewhisker the third cat in the Clan to be sick, the others being Badgerstrike who couldn't shake his cough earlier and Vinetail who had been diagnosed with greencough just a few days before.

It was nearly as bad as the last season, as they were already a moon into leaf-bare and only three cats were sick but that didn't mean it was over or that no other cats would get sick. Jaggedtail attempted to go back to sleep, but he couldn't. He laid in his nest, listening to the breathing and gentle snoring of his Clanmates.

Luckily, sickness had stayed away from the nursery and elder's den. Jaggedtail feared every single day that one of his kits would get sick, he didn't know if he would be able to handle losing one of them, even the thought made him sick to his stomach. Or even losing Elmheart, Maplepool, Cherrypool or anyone else in his family. *I hate this heartless season. I wish it would just be over.*

Jaggedtail rested in his nest until the sun rays of dawn began to peek through the entrance of the warriors den. He then decided to get up and start his dawn, perhaps he would be able to get onto the dawn patrol. He spotted Daisyfern already up and active, ready to assign the day's patrols.

Jaggedtail crossed the snowy camp to reach the deputy. "Good morning, Daisyfern." Jaggedtail dipped his head.

"Good morning, Jaggedtail." Daisyfern waved her tail. 'Looking to get onto the dawn patrol?" She questioned.

"Sure, I'm up might as well make myself useful." Jaggedtail shrugged.

"Sounds good to me, I'll go gather the other warriors I've chosen." Daisyfern returned the warriors den and came back with Amberflame, Rabbitwing, Willowstrike and Shorttail. Daisyfern led the way out of the camp and they set out towards the MoonClan border.

Cloudstar had kept to her word and everything had been normal around the border, no stray scents and their border wasn't extra strong like it had been before. Jaggedtail was convinced that things really had gone back to normal between the two Clans. He hoped that they had, he didn't want to raise his sons into a war, he would rather raise them to live a peaceful life.

The patrol walked along the river bank which was flowing slowly in the gentle weather. It was brisk outside, but it wasn't snowing or windy. The sun was shining overhead, reflecting off the surface of the snow and nearly blinding Jaggedtail but he pushed through it. The patrol reached the MoonClan border and Daisyfern gave it a sniff. "Nothing out of the ordinary." She reported. "As usual, hopefully it stays this way."

Daisyfern commanded Shorttail to go mark the border and they began heading back towards camp. It had been an easy patrol, but a good way for Jaggedtail to wake up. On the way back, Jaggedtail managed to catch a squirrel and decided to bring it to Cherrypool and the kits if they were awake.

They reached camp as the sun started to rise and LichenClan was starting to become a lot more active. The patrol broke up and Jaggedtail started on his way to the nursery. He was halfway across camp when he noticed Sunstorm padding towards him. Jaggedtail set his squirrel down and faced his father, he couldn't help but

notice the troubled expression on his face.

"Hey," Jaggedtail greeted, feeling slightly uneasy by his father's body language. "What's going on?"

"Jaggedtail," Sunstorm breathed out a sad sigh. "Your mother is sick."

Jaggedtail's blood turned to ice. "What? When? How bad is she?" Questions spilled out of Jaggedtail's mouth. *No. You can't take her from me.* Jaggedtail thought, his heart aching.

"She woke up unable to speak because her throat was so raw, she's been coughing all morning and she doesn't feel good at all. Sagefeather instantly diagnosed her with greencough." Sunstorm's voice was low, he was clearly distraught by all of these and Jaggedtail was too.

"Does Maplepool know?" Jaggedtail questioned.

Sunstorm nodded slowly. "She was there with me when we found out." Jaggedtail winced slightly. *I should've been there too.*

"Sagefeather will be able to help her...right?" Jaggedtail asked, but there was no sign of hope in Sunstorm's eyes.

"I can't say, and neither can Sagefeather right now." Sunstorm replied. "Jaggedtail I'm so sorry."

"Can I go see her?" Jaggedtail questioned, he desperately wanted to see his mother. There was no way that StarClan would take his mother, they just couldn't.

"Sagefeather needs her space and she doesn't want the sickness spreading." Sunstorm explained. "The best we can do is work hard and keep our hopes up." Jaggedtail could tell that Sunstorm was forcing these words. *He's so scared, so am I.* Sunstorm and Fawnsky had been mates for many, many moons. They were deeply in love, Jaggedtail couldn't imagine losing Cherrypool.

"Yeah," For his father's sake, Jaggedtail would do everything that he could to keep his hopes as high as possible.

Three long days had passed since Fawnsky entered the medicine cat with greencough and from what Jaggedtail had been told, she showed no signs of recovery. Sagefeather had been doing everything she could to treat her sickness, but nothing was happening. Jaggedtail had been spending all of his time either hunting or in the nursery with his family, despite trying to keep his hopes up, Jaggedtail knew the truth: Fawnsky probably wasn't going to make it. The pain of accepting it hurt his entire body all day and night, he just didn't know what to do. He felt helpless, and the only thing that could help him was his family. Jaggedtail hadn't told his kits about what was going on, they didn't need to worry about death when they were so young. Jaggedtail remembered with Robinkit died, it had completely changed how he felt being a kit and he didn't want that to happen to Brackenkit and Redkit.

"Jaggedtail." A low voice spoke from outside the nursery, Jaggedtail lifted his head and looked towards the direction of the voice. It was Maplepool, she stood just outside the entrance and faced Jaggedtail with shadowed eyes. *No.* "Fawnsky wants to talk to us." She mewed, her voice trembling. "Sagefeather has given us permission to enter the medicine cat den."

"I see." Jaggedtail's voice cracked, he looked to Cherrypool who had sadness deep in her green eyes.

"Go on," She nudged Jaggedtail. "I'll be here with the kits when you get back." Jaggedtail looked at the cat he loved so much, then over at Brackenkit and Redkit who were playing with a ball of moss with Branchkit. Jaggedtail slowly rose, his pawsteps felt incredibly heavy and slow. *I know what's coming, I just don't want to face it.* With Maplepool at his side they made the short walk to the medicine cat den.

He didn't want to step inside that den, he just wanted to run away, run and not face what was about to happen, but he couldn't run away from death. He had to face it, he had to face the truth. Jaggedtail stepped inside the medicine cat, his heart pounding. Elmheart and Sunstorm were already in there. *She invited Elmheart too.* Jaggedtail thought.

Jaggedtail caught Sagefeather's gaze for a moment, it was filled

with sadness. Jaggedtail took a deep breath and approached his mother, sitting down beside Elmheart and Maplepool. "I'm so glad that you're here." Fawnsky mewed, her voice cracking. "I wanted to talk to all of you." She lifted her head weakly. "I would've invited Mosspaw too, but I don't want her to have to deal with this right now."

Maplepool nodded slowly. "It's okay mother." Elmheart leaned against her.

"I wanted to say something to you all," Fawnsky mewed. "First off, Sunstorm. My beloved, living as your mate has been the honor of a lifetime. Every single day you've brought me so much joy and happiness, you helped me raise our kits into incredible warriors, and I'm going to miss you so much but I'll be waiting for you in the stars."

"I'll miss you too, Fawnsky." Sunstorm nodded slowly, his amber eyes were filled to the brim with pain.

"And my beautiful kits..." Fawnsky looked at Maplepool and Jaggedtail. "I am so unbelievably proud of you. Maplepool, you're such a wonderful mother and Mosspaw is going to bring this Clan so much joy and light, I just know it." Maplepool clearly couldn't speak, she buried her nose into Elmheart's chest.

"And Jaggedtail, just as Maplepool is an incredible mother you are an incredible father. Those two sons are so cute and sweet, I just wish I could have gotten to know them a little more. I'll be watching over them from StarClan, I promise. Please tell Cherrypool just how much I care about her, and that I am so glad that you found her."
"I'll tell them all about you, they will know the name Fawnsky." Jaggedtail mewed, unable to keep his voice steady.

"And finally...Elmheart." Fawnsky looked towards the large red-brown tom. "You weren't born to me, but I've always considered you a son. I know that Mosswing is so happy that you and Maplepool fell in love, and I am so proud of you. You're going to do incredible things, Elmheart. I just know it."

"Thank you so much Fawnsky." Elmheart voice was sotic, but his body trembled. "Thank you for giving me a family, thank you for believing in me. Please, tell my mother and Robinkit how much I miss them."

Fawnsky's eyes welled up with emotion and love. "I love you all so much, my family..." She closed her eyes. "Thank you." Her last words were a whisper. The entire den went silent, Jaggedtail couldn't take his eyes off of Fawnsky. He took this time to really look at his mother, she had certainly aged. Her pelt had gone dull, but the light in her eyes had never burned out.

Jaggedtail closed his own eyes, remembering the days when he was a kit. All he wanted to do was curl up against his mother, the cat who brought him into this world. *Thank you, Fawnsky. Thank you for everything.* He opened his eyes once again just as Fawnsky's breathing slowed more and more until eventually she was painfully still. *May StarClan light your path.*

Chapter 35

"Today is a big day, are you ready?" Jaggedtail mewed, looking down at his two sons. "Today is the day you become apprentices."

"Of course we are!" Brackenkit declared, holding his head high. His amber eyes shimmered with a fierce determination.

"I was ready like five moons ago!" Redkit mewed boldly, sitting beside his brother with the same kind of enthusiasm.

"You could barely walk five moons ago." Cherrypool chuckled, flicking her tail over Redkit's ears. "And you're not going anywhere until you two get cleaned up!" She began fussing over Brackenkit who had the same kind of spiky fur as Jaggedtail. Redkit's fur was shorter and easier to manage, but he had a tuft of extra long fur on the top of his head that was never able to be smoothed down.

While Cherrypool fussed over their kits, Jaggedtail found it incredibly hard to believe that his kits were already becoming apprentices. It came out of nowhere, he wasn't sure he was ready for his kits to start their path to becoming warriors, he wanted them to stay kits forever.

"Alright," Cherrypool stepped back from the two very upset kits. "It's time." Cherrypool looked at Jaggedtail with love in her eyes. "I can't believe it's already time."

"I was just thinking that." Jaggedtail breathed out.

"Let all cats old enough to catch their own prey gather around the High Stump for a Clan meeting!" Jaggedtail heard Jumpstar's call from outside the nursery. Jaggedtail and Cherrypool along with their kits, stepped outside into the camp where the Clan was beginning to gather.

"Good luck!" Barkkit called from his own nest where Branchkit was trying to get him to play. It would be there turn in just a short

amount of time, and Barkkit had decided to become a medicine cat apprentice as his mother had been, Jaggedtail thought it was fitting.

It had been a long three moons since Fawnsky passed, and she wasn't the only one claimed by greencough. Badgerstrike and Vinetail had lost their lives as well. Leaf-bare was hard as usual, but it eventually passed and now the forest was back into newleaf. The forest was full of life and they could get back onto the path of peace and happiness.

As they walked to the gathered Clan, Jaggedtail looked down at his sons. They walked with purpose and both were incredibly eager to get started and Jaggedtail honestly couldn't wait, despite the fact that he still wanted them to be kits he knew that both Redkit and Brackenkit would be incredible warriors someday.

Jaggedtail and Cherrypool sat down besides Elmheart and Maplepool as Redkit and Brackenkit stepped into the center of the crowd. Jumpstar looked down at the two kits proudly. "I've gathered the Clan because these two kits are ready to begin their paths as warriors. Today is a proud day for LichenClan, by naming apprentices we show that we will remain strong for many moons to come. Brackenkit, from this day forward until you have earned your warrior name you will be known as Brackenpaw. The mentor I've chosen for you is Rabbitwing, he is a quick witted and strong warrior, I know he will teach you everything that you need to know."

Jaggedtail nodded in approval of Rabbitwing, he was a young warrior but Jaggedtail had faith that he would teach his son well. Branckenpaw and Rabibtwing touched noses, leaving it up to Redkit.

"Redkit, from this day forward until you have earned your warrior name you will be known as Redpaw. Your mentor will be Owlheart, she is strong and fierce so I know she will be able to teach you the skills to become a warrior." Redpaw stepped forward, touching his nose to Owlheart's and the ceremony was finished.

"Brackenpaw! Redpaw! Brackenpaw! Redpaw!" The Clan cheered for their newest apprentices and Jaggedtail couldn't help but feel a

rush of pride. *They're going to be incredible warriors.*

When the crowd dispersed, Jaggedtail and Cherrypool approached their kits. "Congratulations." Jaggedtail purred. "You're finally apprentices."

"Now we have to wait to be warriors." Redpaw mewed, flicking his tail.

"Your apprenticeship will fly by." Cherrypool purred. "Trust me, you'll be working your tails off for the next few moons. It will be such an incredible experience for you two and Owlheart and Rabbitwing are such wonderful warriors. I know you'll do great."

"That's kind of you to say, Cherrypool." Rabbitwing purred, looking over at Brackenpaw. "I suggest we get started right away, there isn't a moment to waste."

Jaggedtail and Cherrypool let their kits head out into the forest for the first time, Jaggedtail hoped that everything would be okay. *I just have to trust my kits and their mentors, I know that everything will be alright.* Jaggedtail looked at Cherrypool. 'Well what do we do now?"

"I don't know about you but I want to go out and hunt." Cherrypool mewed. "I haven't gotten to leave the camp in six moons! I need to really stretch my paws."

"Allow me to join you." Jaggedtail purred. Together the two of them headed out into the forest as well, as they walked Cherrypool took in a heavy breath of fresh-air.

"Oh I've missed the forest so much." She purred. "I love those two kits more than anything but I have certainly missed my duties as a warrior."

"And I've missed hunting with you." Jaggedtail stepped forward as he realized that he and Cherrypool hadn't been able to spend any time alone together since Redpaw and Brackenpaw were born. Jaggedtail touched his muzzle to Cherrypool's, breathing in her sweet scent. *Oh how I've missed this.*

Jaggedtail and Cherrypool set out into the territory, walking side by side. As they began their hunt, Jaggedtail remembered how much he loved spending time with Cherrypool, and just how much he missed it. Their hunt began and Jaggedtail began tracking prey, the forest smelled fresh and full of life.

After only a short while, Jaggedtail caught the scent of a squirrel. With Cherrypool's help he tracked it to a large tree near the MoonClan border. He dropped into a crouch and spotted the small creature nibbling on a beech nut underneath the tree. Jaggedtail crept forward silently, making sure his breath was silent. He lashed his tail and when the time was right, Jaggedtail pounced forward. His paws landed perfectly on top of the squirrel and he killed it with an easy bite to the throat.

"Great catch." Cherrypool purred. "Now it's my turn." Excitement sparked in her green eyes and Cherrypool began the search for her own prey. Both of them could hear birds chirping and Jaggedtail knew that's what Cherrypool would be looking for. He followed Cherrypool as she tracked down her prey.

There was a single robin on the ground, pecking at the earth for worms. Jaggedtail watched Cherrypool hunt, even though she had been stuck in camp for six moons her form was perfect. The sun shimmered across her ginger tabby pelt, and her muscles still showed underneath her pelt. *She's so beautiful.* Jaggedtail thought, he loved nothing more than watching Cherrypool.

Cherrypool crept forward, completely silent and the robin had no idea the danger that it was in. In the blink of an eye, Cherrypool shot forward like an adder. The bird began to take off but Cherrypool caught the wing of the creature in her claws and pulled it back down to the forest floor, killing it with a neat bite to the neck.

"Impressive." Jaggedtail purred, completely in awe at watching Cherrypool hunt. "You're truly amazing."

"It wasn't that impressive." Cherrypool purred.

"But it was." Jaggedtail moved close to Cherrypool once again.

"Everything about you is amazing, Cherrypool. There's a reason that I love you so much."

"I love you too." Cherrypool breathed out, brushing up against Jaggedtail. Right where he stood was perfect, Jaggedtail was completely and utterly in love with Cherrypool. *She's my mate, the mother of my kits and everything I ever wanted in my life. As long as I have my family, I know that everything will be okay.*

Chapter 36

Jaggedtail stretched out his legs, the sun was beaming down onto his pelt and the air was beautiful and fresh. It was nearly greenleaf, but the season of newleaf had been so good to LichenClan. Prey was bountiful and LichenClan was thriving once again. It had been a moon since Brackenpaw and Redpaw's apprentice ceremony and about a half-moon after that, Branchpaw and Barkpaw had been named apprentices as well. Barkpaw was made Sagefeather's apprentice and Branchpaw had been given Elmheart as a mentor.

Jaggedtail had been incredibly thrilled for his friend for finally get himself an apprentice and he knew that Elmheart was excited about it as well. Even though Mosspaw was incredibly ahead of Branchpaw, they still did there best to train their apprentices together. It wouldn't be long before Mosspaw was a warrior, and Jaggedtail was very excited for that day.

"Jaggedtail!" Daisyfern's call got Jaggedtail's attention. He looked at Cherrypool and took one final bite of prey. "Guess I'm being called." He mewed, giving Cherrypool a quick nuzzle on the cheek before he trotted quickly over to Daisyfern.

"What do you need?" He questioned.

"Find your apprentice, you're going on the final patrol of the day." Daisyfern instructed. "Get her and then meet with your patrol mates here, Elmheart will be leading it." Jaggedtail nodded and began sniffing around for Mosspaw. He found her having a conversation with Brackenpaw.

"There you are." He mewed. "You're wanted on patrol, we'll be going with Elmheart too."

"Okay." Mosspaw purred and stood up. She had been working very hard as an apprentice, her skills were sharpened and Jaggedtail knew that her assessment should be soon. *She's more than earned it, I just want the right time to come.* It didn't take long for the rest of the

patrol to show up, it was Elmheart with Branchpaw, Owlheart with Redpaw, Amberflame, Gingerdust and Fieldfoot. Jaggedtail was excited to be going on patrol with his son, he always enjoyed seeing the kind of progress his kits were making.

"Where are we going?" Jaggedtail questioned Elmheart who would be taking the lead.

"AshClan border." He replied with a flick of his tail. In the past few days, Jaggedtail sense that something was off about Elmheart but he couldn't quite place what it was or why. He really needed to take a moment to talk to him about it. *We've both been so busy with kits and apprentices.* Jaggedtail thought sadly. *Maybe we can go out hunting together later.* He would do his best to remember to ask Elmheart to go hunting with him.

With Elmheart in the lead, Jaggedtail and the rest of the patrol set out into the forest. It was just before sunset and the air still fresh and cool. Jaggedtail walked beside Elmheart while Redpaw, Mosspaw and Branchpaw all shared a conversation behind them. Gingerdust and Fieldfood had a conversation as well while Amberflame talked with Owlheart.

"How's Branchpaw been treating you?" Jaggedtail questioned.

"He's a very dedicated apprentice." Elmheart replied keeping his eyes forward. "He's going to make an incredible warrior in time, I can't wait to see how he is going to grow. How is Mosspaw? Do you think she'll be a warrior soon?"

"I think so." Jaggedtail nodded slowly. "In the next moon or so I think I will hold her final assessment."

"I'd love to partake if you'd let me," Elmheart mewed. "I could test Branchpaw as well."

"I would love that." Jaggedtail purred eager at the thought of spending time with Elmheart.

They neared the AshClan border and Jaggedtail's ears perked at the sound of voices, they sounded incredibly close. *We're not that close*

to the border yet. Jaggedtail thought, his fur standing on edge.

They got closer to the border and Jaggedtail saw a flash of gray and white fur, it was the AshClan warrior Blossomheart. She hadn't seen the patrol yet and she was chasing down a squirrel, when she caught the prey it was on LichenClan territory. Elmheart noticed this too and he yowled loudly to get her attention.

Blossomheart skidded to a stop and looked in horror towards the noise. Jaggedtail could feel the anger radiating off Elmheart's pelt, and while Jaggedtail was sure it was a mistake, a warrior should be able to scent the border.

"What do you think you're doing?" Elmheart demanded dangerously as they reached Blossomheart.

"Um, catching prey, do you mind?" Blossomheart lashed her tail. *Is this cat stupid?* Jaggedtail thought, how could she not know.

"You're hunting on *LichenClan* land." Elmheart growled.

"What?"

"Blossomheart!" A loud call came from inside AshClan territory as the rest of the patrol showed up, it was lead by Riverstorm. "What are you doing? You've crossed the border."

"Oh," Blossomheart looked incredibly flustered, she picked up her prey and quickly ran to the other side.

"They prey doesn't belong to you." Elmheart snarled, then looked at Riverstorm. "Don't your warriors know how to hunt? Or navigate their own territory?"

"She made a mistake." Riverstorm defended. "And do not insult my warriors like that." She lashed her tail.

"I will when they're idiots. Any apprentice could scent the two borders, and yet your *warrior* crossed the border when catching her prey, which again, *doesn't belong to her.*"

"I'm the one who caught it!" Blossomheart spat.

"On our land!" Elmheart roared, his claws were digging into the soil below. Jaggedtail could feel the tension in the air, if things didn't calm down soon there would be a battle.

"Stand down, Elmheart." Jaggedtail mewed quietly.

"I will when Riverstorm admits that her warriors are stupid and the stupid warrior in questions gives up the prey she caught on our land." Elmheart mewed, his voice getting dangerously low.

"Blossomheart will give up her prey when Elmheart learns how to respect other cats instead of throwing insults out like a kit." Riverstorm snarled. "Otherwise, we will be keeping it."

"I'm not going to let you walk away with that prey." Elmheart took a step closer to the border.

"You don't want this fight, Elmheart." Riverstorm's blue eyes sparked dangerously. "I'll add to those ugly scars on your face."

Elmheart chuckled. "I'd like to see you try!"

"Come now, AshClan." Riverstorm turned her back on Elmheart which angered him even more. *Don't do it.* Jaggedtail thought, he could see that Elmheart was ready to attack. "Let's leave, *with* our prey."

As Blossomheart turned away, Elmheart let out a furious yowl and charged forward going straight for the gray and white warrior. *Oh for StarClan's sake!* Jaggedtail thought, and as Elmheart crashed into Blossomheart, Jaggedtail knew that they had no choice but to fight alongside him or Elmheart would be shredded.

Riverstorm quickly rushed to Blossomheart's side and began slashing at Elmheart's flank with her claws. Jaggedtail hissed and pinned Riverstorm to the ground. *This isn't a battle we should be fighting.* Jaggedtail thought, but he would defend Elmheart to the bitter end if he had to. Riverstorm quickly got back to her paws and lashed out at Jaggedtail.

He felt her razor sharp claws ripping into his flank, the she-cat was quick and strong and would be a challenge to fight, but Jaggedtail

was ready to face it. He ducked away from Riverstorm's attack and shot forward quickly, headbutting the blue warrior in the chest. She let out a sharp gasp of air and stumbled backwards.

Jaggedtail swiped at her legs, making her fall completely to the ground. Riverstorm recovered quickly, shooting back up and sinking her teeth deep into Jaggedtail's foreleg, he hissed in pain and clawed at her face, his claws slightly grazing her cheek. Riverstorm hissed in rage and shoved her hind paws deep into Jaggedtail's belly.

He let out a gasp of air and stumbled backwards, Riverstorm jumped up on her paws and threw Jaggedtail to the side. His head landed heavily on the forest floor and his vision began to blur from the pain.

Jaggedtail clenched his jaw and ignored the pain to defend himself against Riverstorm's assault. He lashed out with his forepaws, feeling them connect with Riverstorm's chest. He dug his claws into her fur and shoved her off. He scrambled to his paws and jumped into her back, she couldn't hold his weight and her legs gave out from under her.

Jaggedtail slashed his claws down Riverstorm's back and she yelled out in pain. She struggled underneath his paws and she was starting to panic. Jaggedtail let her up in hopes that she would command her Clan to leave. She stood up with shaky paws. "All of this for a piece of prey?" Riverstorm hissed.

Jaggedtail didn't respond. *I didn't want this fight, but I'll fight alongside Elmheart.* He thought. "Take your Clan and go." He demanded.

"Not on your life." Riverstorm spat and moved in for another attack but Jaggedtail heard a panicked cry. Both he and Riverstorm skidded to a stop and looked towards the sound.

"What did you do?" The terrified voice came from Owlheart. "He was just an apprentice!" Jaggedtail's blood turned to ice. *What happened.* He spotted Branchpaw wrestling with an AshClan apprentice, but he didn't like that the voice came from Redpaw's

mentor. Forgetting Riverstorm, Jaggedtail sprinted to where Owlheart was and he felt his heart shatter into a million pieces as he rested his eyes on the source of her terror.

Redpaw was on the ground, his green eyes open wide in shock with a terrible wound in his neck, his body was painfully still and he wasn't moving. *No.* Jaggedtail felt his legs begin to quiver before the gave out entirely. *No.* He couldn't take his eyes off of his son's body. *He's not dead.* The pain spreading through Jaggedtail. *This isn't real. It can't be real.*

"Redpaw..." Jaggedtail breathed out his dead son's name, he moved slowly towards Redpaw's body. *No.*

"I-I'm sorry..." The voice came from an AshClan warrior, Crowstep.

"Leave." Jaggedtail choked out, he couldn't say anything else.

He could hear the AshClan warriors leaving, but Jaggedtail couldn't see anything else but Redpaw.

"Jaggedtail..." The voice came from Elmheart and suddenly an emotion other than pain filled Jaggedtail's chest. It was rage. Jaggedtail stood up and turned suddenly on Elmheart.

"This is your fault!" He shouted. "My son is dead because you just had to start a fight!" Elmheart's eyes went wide and filled with pain.

"She-she stole prey..."
"Was Redpaw's life worth that stupid piece of prey?" Jaggedtail spat. "If you would've just let it go Redpaw would still be alive!" Jaggedtail couldn't bring himself to look at Elmheart anymore, he turned back to Redpaw and buried his nose into his tiny body, breathing in the last of his scent.

"My precious son..." Jaggedtail trembled. "I'm so sorry...I'm so so sorry." Jaggedtail closed his eyes, he couldn't move. The anger, the pain had all faded and now he just felt numb. How could he return to camp? How could he go on living without his son? *How am I going to tell Cherrypool?* The thought of seeing Cherrypool's face when he told her completely tore him apart. *I can't do this, StarClan*

why did it have to be him?

Jaggedtail finally found the strength to start returning to camp, he carried Redpaw solely on his back, feeling pain throughout his entire body. He stayed as far away as he could from Elmheart who walked in the front of the patrol, dragging his tail through the leaves. *I can't even look at him.* Jaggedtail thought, all he wanted to look at was Redpaw. They finally reached camp and it was Daisyfern who noticed them first. "What happened to you guys?"

"Border skirmish." Elmheart replied, Jaggedtail glared at Elmheart. *You started the fight.* He had never felt this kind of anger before, especially not towards his best friend. *Will I ever be able to look at him the same way again?* "Redpaw--" Elmheart's voice choked off. "Redpaw is dead."

Jaggedtail grit his teeth and he flattened his ears. He gently set down Redpaw's body down, looking at his son once more. *I need to tell Cherrypool and Brackenpaw.* He found Cherrypool sitting with Hazelshine, he took a moment to take in Cherrypool's beauty. *I'm so, so sorry my love.* He thought.

"Cherrypool..." Jaggedtail mewed, barely finding the strength to speak.

Cherrypool looked up, happy to see Jaggedtail but her expression quickly shifted when she saw him. "Jaggedtail...what's wrong? You're bleeding, what happened?"

"Cherrypool," Jaggedtail's legs shook and he fell against his mate. "Cherrypool, Redpaw is dead."

"What?" Cherrypool breathed out, he could hear the pain in her voice. "H-how?"

"Elmheart started a fight--I can't--" Jaggedtail couldn't find the strength to speak anymore. "I'm so sorry."

Cherrypool let out a wail of pain and fell into Jaggedtail, together they sat and quietly mourned the loss of their son. Nothing felt real, and Jaggedtail knew that nothing would ever be the same again.

How will I live without him? This pain will never go away.

It took Cherrypool and Jaggedtail a long time to stand up and face their son's vigil. Redpaw's body had been prepared like he was sleeping. Jaggedtail stared blankly down at Redpaw. *My poor kit, I was supposed to protect you.* Jaggedtail closed his eyes, trying to remember every little thing about Redpaw, his sweet voice, his eager amber eyes and his desire to become a great warrior.

"Jaggedtail..." Maplepool spoke quietly, moving in beside Jaggedtail. "I'm so so sorry, I don't even want to imagine what you're going through..." She whimpered. *You can't, no one can.* Jaggedtail thought painfully. He didn't respond to anyone's wishes or telling him that they were sorry for his loss. He spotted Elmheart at the vigil as well, but Elmheart only stared blankly at Redpaw's body. *I can't handle this right now.*

Jaggedtail let Cherrypool lean against him and closed his eyes. *Fawnsky please...keep Redpaw safe in StarClan. I'll never forget you, my little warrior.*

Chapter 37

Jaggedtail stepped out into the brisk early morning air, suppressing a shiver. He breathed the scent of the forest, but it didn't smell the way that it used to. Nothing was the same anymore. Jaggedtail's world had grown dull, not even prey tasted as good anymore. With a heavy sigh, Jaggedtail decided to get started with his day. It had been five long moons since Redpaw's death and nothing had felt right since that day. Jaggedtail worked hard to try and fall back into his normal life, which he had but the pain of Redpaw's death was still like a fresh wound on his pelt, it never stopped aching.

In the five moons that had passed, Mossleaf and Brakcenheart had been named warriors as well as Barkclaw earning his full medicine cat name and Ashstream had moved into the nursery expecting Rabbitwing's kits, LichenClan was thriving but Jaggedtail and Cherrypool weren't. Jaggedtail believed that he would never find his happiness again, he had been incredibly proud and happy for Brackenheart to receive his warrior name, but after the moment was over the normal pain returned.

Jaggedtail looked around camp for Daisyfern, hoping that the she-cat would have something for him to do. All he did most days was hunt and patrol all day to keep his mind off the pain. He noticed that she was talking to Elmheart and Jaggedtail's heart twisted. He had barely spoken to Elmheart since Redpaw's death.

At the time, Jaggedtail lashed out at Elmheart for starting the fight but he had a lot of time to think and he didn't really blame his best friend for the death of son, Elmheart had been justified in the fight that he started but Jaggedtail had been too scared to talk to Elmheart again. He feared that their friendship had been destroyed forever.

"Go talk to him." A gentle voice spoke from behind Jaggedtail, he looked over at Cherrypool who clearly noticed him watching Elmheart. "You need him in your life, Jaggedtail. You always have."

Jaggedtail took a deep breath. "I know, I miss him but..." His voice trailed off. "I don't know how to fix it, or what to say."

"Just talk." Cherrypool nudged him forward. "Let him know what you're feeling, I'm sure that Elmheart has been dying to try and be there for you, but he's scared too."

Jaggedtail sighed. "Alright." He nuzzled Cherrypool, the only thing that still kept him going was her. *I couldn't do this without her.* Jaggedtail thought, giving her a quick lick on the cheek before going towards Elmheart. He approached his old friend, dragging his friends. "Hey."

Elmheart looked at Jaggedtail his eyes going wide. "H-hey, what's up? Trying to get on a patrol?"

"N-no," Jaggedtail avoided his gaze. "I want to talk to you, actually."

"Alright..." Elmheart looked at Daisyfern. "I'll be right back." Jaggedtail didn't say anything else as they walked out of camp to find a secluded place to talk. "What did you want to talk about?"

Jaggedtail took a deep breath and sat down. "Look, I'm sorry about what I said--back during the battle." His voice cracked at the thought of Redpaw's death. "I was just...so shocked, so hurt and so torn apart, I needed someone to blame. I didn't want to accept that he was dead."

"You're not the one who should be apologizing, Jaggedtail." Elmheart mewed quietly. "I'm the one who started the fight, I should've just let Blossomheart take the prey. Nothing was worth the life of your son." Elmheart looked up towards the sky. "Every since that day I've been questioning everything I do, I didn't know if you ever wanted to speak to me again."

"I did," Jaggedtail sighed. "I just didn't know how, everything hurt, everything *still* hurts. I don't know how to go on without Redpaw, nothing has felt right since he died and I don't know if I can handle it anymore."

"I spoke to my mother once," Elmheart began. "About losing

Robinkit, she told me that losing one of her kits was unlike any pain she had ever felt before. She said that even though the pain never went away, she learned to live with it. She put her love into me and other things about her day. She told me that one day when she passed away, Robinkit would be waiting for. It hurt to never see her become an apprentice or warrior, but she knew that every time she looked up at the stars, Robinkit would be looking back."

Jaggedtail listed to each of Elmheart's words, gazing up towards the sky. There were no stars yet, but Redpaw was up there. *He's up there, with Fawnsky. With Mosswing and with Robinkit.* Jaggedtail closed his eyes. *I'll see Redpaw again, I know I will.* Jaggedtail looked at Elmheart. "Thank you," He dipped his head. "I really needed to hear that."

Elmheart nodded slowly. "No problem." He sighed. "That night I took a close look at Mossleaf, I realized that I would be completely destroyed if she died. That doesn't compare to you actually losing Redpaw, but I understood a little more of what you felt I guess. I just figured that you didn't want me around anymore, that I had messed everything up."

Jaggedtail gently nudged Elmheart. "That will never be true, you're my best friend, my brother." Jaggedtail and Elmheart met gazes, they held it for a very long time and for the first time in five moons, the pain subsided, even if it was just for a moment. "I lost my son that night, I can't lose you too."

Jaggedtail and Elmheart spent a few moments catching up about the last five moons before they returned to camp. Jaggedtail finally felt a small weight being lifted off his shoulders. Rekindling his friendship with Elmheart wouldn't bring Redpaw back, but it certainly made him feel happier.

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"I'll be leading the patrol," Daisyfern began. "And I want Amberflame, Jaggedtail, Elmheart, Branchpaw, Fieldfoot and Gingerdust." Jaggedtail looked around at the cats chosen for the patrol, they would be patrolling the AshClan border. Elmheart called for Branchpaw who was watching his brother who

Sagefeather had just announced had earned his full medicine cat name.

Branchpaw was a very ambitious apprentice, but he had a lot of skill. Elmheart had taught him incredibly well, Jaggedtail knew that his warrior ceremony would be any day. He had also noticed that Elmheart had learned a lot from having an apprentice. *He's grown a lot, but I still can't help but feel something is bothering him.* Elmheart tossed and turned in his sleep, often growling and hissing as well. It happened almost every single night, Jaggedtail just hoped that whatever was bothering his friend would pass.

It had been four days since Jaggedtail and Elmheart had made amends and Jaggedtail had felt himself falling back more and more into normalcy and it felt nice. It had him thinking that maybe things really could get back to some kind of normal, even without Redpaw. The patrol carried on, nearing the AshClan border.

Jaggedtail's paws begin to twitch as they reached the spot where Redpaw died, he did his best to keep himself together. Daisyfern lifted her muzzle, sniffing the air. "Nothing out of the ordinary." She mewed. "Perhaps AshClan have finally relaxed."

"Not likely." Elmheart flicked his tail, looking across the border into AshClan territory. "AshClan are always up to no good."

"May I remind you who *started* that fight, Elmheart?" Daisyfern looked at Elmheart with annoyance in her eyes. Jaggedtail couldn't help but wince. Elmheart snorted but held his tongue while Daisyfern rolled her eyes. "Let's keep going, Gingerdust mark the border and we'll continue." She mewed. "The day is still early, we have time to check more of the territory as well."

The patrol moved onward into LichenClan territory once Gingerdust was done, and despite the chilly leaf-fall air, Jaggedtail enjoyed the cool breeze on his pelt, he tried his best to focus on the forest and not the area they had just left. *Will I ever be able to face the border again?* Jaggedtail had done his best to avoid the AshClan border, and Daisyfern had been kind enough to not send him on patrols to that area for a while but he knew he would eventually have to face it, today he did and he was still standing. *I can do this.* Jaggedtail

told himself.

A foul stench filled Jaggedtail's nose, one that caused the fur on his spine to rise. He had smelled this scent once before, when Mosswing and Applepaw died. He could tell that the rest of the patrol had scented it as well, they came to a stop.

"Fox." Daisyfern growled, flattening her ears. "Stay alert." She commanded. The entire patrol was on edge now, Jaggedtail included. He felt a phantom pain in the shoulder that had been wounded by the same fox, he also saw flashes of Applepaw's death. *Foxes are bad news.* Jaggedtail thought. "If it's a young fox, we can drive it off ourselves but if it's bigger we will want to bring backup." Daisyfern mewed. Jaggedtail didn't want to fight it at all, but he would if his deputy told him to.

As they moved closer, the stench of fox was all that Jaggedtail could smell. *It's close.* He thought. They moved forward silently and with caution, they didn't want the fox to find them first. "Look." Fieldfoot whispered, motioning with his paw towards something on the ground.

"Fox dung." Daisyfern wrinkled her nose in disgust. "We're close, be ready for a fight if it sees us first."

"Over there." Jaggedtail noticed that Branchpaw had come to a stop, he motioned deeper into the trees. Daisyfern moved forward slowly to investigate, Jaggedtail kept his eyes peeled for the creature, and when he finally saw the fox he was surprised at its appearance. The fox was incredibly skinny, with dirty matted fur. Its ribs poked out against the ragged pelt and its white muzzle was lined with dried blood. It was currently tearing into a squirrel with others torn at its paws. *Disgusting.* Jaggedtail thought, foxes simply had no care in the world at anything they did. *Mindless creature.* He flicked his tail.

"We can fight it." Daisyfern decided. "It's weak and starving, we need to drive it out before it decides to hunt down our Clanmates." Jaggedtail agreed with that part, but he still didn't want to fight it. *I don't have a choice.* If this fox was starving, it would be fighting for a meal. *It's going to try its absolute best to kill us.* Jaggedtail thought, shivers climbing up his spine.

Daisyfern turned to the rest of her patrol. "Elmheart, Branchpaw you go around and get behind it," She instructed. "Gingerdust and Fieldfoot will attack it from the front and Jaggedtail and I will start the attack. The fox will think it's only fighting two of us, and then the four of you come out and surprise it." Jaggedtail nodded slowly along with the deputy's plan, he wasn't thrilled about being the one starting the fight but he wouldn't complain.

Jaggedtail and Daisyfern crouched in the undergrowth while the rest of the patrol moved silently to their positions, Jaggedtail watched Elmheart and Branchpaw vanish into the forest. His heart was pounding in his chest, but Jaggedtail kept his head high. "Go on my command." Daisyfern whispered, Jaggedtail just gave a stern nod.

Jaggedtail took a deep breath before Daisyfern gave the signal, he did his best to keep his paws from shaking. *Just fight, Jaggedtail.* He told himself. Daisyfern waved her tail and in that instant both of them exploded out of the undergrowth, charging towards the fox. The fox whipped its head around to face the sudden attack. It let out a cry and charged forward. As it moved, the rest of the patrol joined in on the fight.

As Elmheart and Fieldfoot went for the fox's hind legs, it waved its narrow head around trying to figure out which cat to attack. Jaggedtail shot forward and slipped underneath the fox, flipping onto his back and battering at its belly with his claws. Jaggedtail wasn't expecting the fox to flatten down on top of him.

Jaggedtail was being smothered by its bloody and foul smelling pelt, Jaggedtail slashed blindly at the fox as his air was cut off completely. He heard a yowl of anger and the fox yelped and stood up, Jaggedtail saw that Elmheart had come in to attack. Jaggedtail got back on his paws, shaking his head and taking in several long breaths.

Jaggedtail saw Daisyfern slashed violently at the fox's muzzle, the fox swatted a paw at Elmheart and Jaggedtail its eyes focusing in on Daisyfern. The deputy let out a powerful battle cry and jumped forward, the fox however was prepared for this and used its paw to shove Daisyfern to the ground. She landed with a harsh thud and

her pale eyes were glazed over. *We have to help her!* Before any of them could even move, the fox sank its teeth into Daisyfern's throat and lifted her up off the ground, Jaggedtail watched in horror as her eyes filled with fear. *No! Not again!*

"No!" The cry came from Branchpaw and the apprentice charged forward. He gave a mighty jump and landed on the fox's shoulder and began slashing at the fox's face and eyes. The fox dropped Daisyfern and began thrashing its head wildly. It sank its teeth into Branchpaw's leg and threw him across the forest floor.

"Now's our chance!" Elmheart shouted, the fox was starting to panic and had blood covering its eyes. "Jaggedtail now!"

Jaggedtail and Elmheart charged towards the fox, letting out yowls of fury. Jaggedtail prayed that Branchpaw was okay, but he had less hope about Daisyfern. *Just get this fox out of here!* He told himself.

The fox looked at Jaggedtail and Elmheart and let out a high pitched whine before turning tail and running into the forest. Jaggedtail and Elmheart gave chase, determined to get it completely out of the territory.

Both warriors ran as fast as they could to keep up with the wounded creature, they led it away from MoonClan territory and towards the twolegplace beyond LichenClan's borders. With a few extra swipes and nips at the fox's legs they sent it running out of the territory. Jaggedtail and Elmheart came to a stop, watching it run. Jaggedtail's heart was pounding painfully in his chest, he hadn't moved like that in moons.

"Come on," Elmheart breathed out. "Let's get back, I need to see if Daisyfern is okay." Jaggedtail and Elmheart quickly ran back to the scene of the battle, they stopped running once they got close to catch their breaths. They arrived back at the location and the scent of blood was heavy in the air.

It ran towards the twolegplace." Jaggedtail explained. "It shouldn't be coming back anytime soon."

"We showed--" Elmheart's voice choked off once he saw Daisyfern's

lifeless body. "Is she--" Jaggedtail looked down at the deputy's body, his stomach churning. *I knew we shouldn't have fought that thing!* Jaggedtail thought painfully. He looked towards Branchpaw, the apprentice had a bloody wound on his leg but it didn't look bad, he was already standing on it.

Gingerdust nodded. "She must have died while she was being picked up by the fox, there wasn't anything any of us could've done. She died as she lived, for her Clan." Gingerdust's words didn't do much to make Jaggedtail feel better. *Our deputy is dead.* Jaggedtail thought painfully.

Fieldfoot and Elmheart carried Daisyfern's body back to camp and Jaggedtail feared what Jumpstar would think. *Daisyfern is Jumpstar's kit.* Losing Redpaw had nearly destroyed Jaggedtail and Cherrypool, what would happen to Jumpstar?

They reached camp which was incredibly active, it was Vinetail who stepped forward. "What in the name of StarClan happened?" She demanded, her green eyes wide in horror.

"There was a fox on the territory." Elmheart replied, his voice strained. "We drove it off but not before it killed Daisyfern."

Jaggedtail didn't have any wounds that needed tending to, so he slowly walked away from the patrol. He needed Cherrypool, by the time he had reached her the news already spread. "Oh, Jaggedtail!" Cherrypool mewed, running up to him and nuzzling him all over. "I'm so glad you're alright." Her voice was filled with panic.

"I don't know if I'm alright." Jaggedtail mewed quietly. "But I'm uninjured." Jaggedtail leaned against Cherrypool, trying to forget what had just happened. He never wanted to face another fox again, they were deadly creatures that shouldn't be messed with. *What if I had spoken up.* Jaggedtail wondered. *What if I suggested we get back up, would Daisyfern still be alive?*

"Let all cats old enough to catch their own prey gather around the High Stump for a Clan meeting." Jumpstar's voice called out from the center of camp, but it wasn't as bold as it usually was, it was thick with sadness and pain, a pain Jaggedtail knew all too well.

Jaggedtail looked at Cherrypool for a moment and two of them crossed camp to sit with the rest of their Clan.

You all know by now about the death of our beloved deputy, Daisyfern." Jumpstar began. "Daisyfern was my daughter and I have never felt a pain like this before. However, I know that Daisyfern is now happy living in the stars along with her mother, Mothflame. Daisyfern was proud, cheerful and incredibly brave and she died to drive out a fox that threatened our home. I know I speak for all of us when I saw that she will be missed dearly." The cats of LichenClan held a long moment of silence for their fallen deputy.

"As the warrior code states, I must name a new deputy before moonhigh and that isn't far off. I know I wish to succeed Daisyfern, but I must perform another ceremony first." Jaggedtail felt a twinge of confusion. *What kind of ceremony would he need to perform first.* Then he realized, LichenClan only had one apprentice right now. Jaggedtail looked at Elmheart, had he figured it out as well?

Jumpstar jumped down from the High Stump. "Branchpaw, step forward." Branchpaw looked completely caught off guard, his dark amber eyes going wide. Jumpstar looked towards Elmheart. "Elmheart, do you believe that your apprentice is ready to become a warrior?" Judging from the look in Elmheart's eyes, he was not expecting this.

Elmheart stood up after gathering himself. Yes, Elmheart. He has proven time and time again to be a dedicated hunter and fighter, and his loyalty to the Clan is unquestionable. During the fight against the fox, he did everything he could to try and save Daisyfern. He is ready." Jaggedtail was impressed at the way that Elmheart spoke, he truly cared about Branchpaw, and Jaggedtail agreed. Branchpaw was the first to act and try and save and Daisyfern.

"Very well," Jumpstar turned back to Branchpaw. "Branchpaw, do you promise to uphold the warrior code and defend the Clan, even at the cost of your life?"

"I do." Branchpaw spoke loudly and boldly.

"Then by the powers of StarClan I give you your warrior name. Branchpaw, from this day forward you will be known as Branchfur. StarClan honors your courage and dedication and we welcome you as a full warrior of LichenClan."

Branchfur and Jumpstar repeated what many warriors had done before, then Branchfur stepped back his eyes shimmering with pride. *Branchfur will be a wonderful warrior.* Jaggedtail thought.

"Now I will perform my next ceremony." Jumpstar continued. Jaggedtail knew what that would be, he had to name Branchfur as a warrior because a cat can't be deputy without having mentored an apprentice.

"I say these words before the spirit of Daisyfern, so that she may hear and approve my choice. Elmheart will be the new deputy of LichenClan!"

Jaggedtail looked towards his friend, his amber eyes burning with a fierce fire of pride and determination. *He deserves this.* Jaggedtail thought, his heart swelling with pride and love for his best friend.

Elmheart stepped forward, the sun reflecting off his brown pelt. "I can promise you Jumpstar, that while I may not be able to take Daisyfern's place, I will do my best to be a deputy that she and all of my Clan can be proud of."

"I have no doubt, Elmheart." Jumpstar mewed, his eyes sparkling.

"Branchfur! Elmheart! Branchfur! Elmheart!" The Clan cheered for their newest warrior and deputy. Jaggedtail rushed over to Elmheart, unable to contain his excitement.

"Congratulations!" Jaggedtail mewed, nuzzling all over Elmheart. "I'm so proud of you, brother."

"Thank you." Elmheart dipped his head. "I just hope that I'll be able to live up to everyone's expectations."

"Don't worry about the others," Maplepool purred, touching her muzzle to Elmheart's cheek. "Just do your best, my love."

"I will." Elmheart breathed out.

"I know you would be leader some day!" Mossleaf proclaimed. "I just knew it!"
"I don't think I'll be leader any time soon." Elmheart purred at his daughter. "But I've wanted to be deputy for a long time."

"Don't forget our promise." Jaggedtail nudged Elmheart playfully, recalling the promise the two of them had made many, many moons ago.

"I never could." Elmheart nodded.

"Congratulations." Another voice spoke, it was Sunstorm as he approached the group. "I'm proud of you, Elmheart."

"Thank you." Elmheart nodded.

"I know that both Fawnsky and Mosswing are incredibly proud of you, just as we all are." Jaggedtail nodded slowly at his father's words. *Elmheart has so many cats who love him, and I'm so happy for that.* Jaggedtail closed his eyes, this was the beginning of change for LichenClan, and Jaggedtail knew that no matter what the Clan faced, they could survive it.

Chapter 38

Once again, leaf-bare had claimed the forest in its icy claws. The seasons seemed to move so quickly as Jaggedtail's life continued on. At this point he simply expected sickness to claim a few lives, but he didn't know who it would claim. He could simply only prey that he wouldn't lose anyone close to him, but he really hoped he wouldn't take a single cat. That was wishful thinking however, and Jaggedtail knew what to expect. He had done this before, many times now.

In fact, two cats were already sick. Amberflame and Gingerdust had been confined to the medicine cat den, and many more would be joining them soon Jaggedtail just knew that would be their future. Jumpstar had actually been the first cat to get sick, but he managed to kick the sickness despite all odds and was back on his paws without even losing a life, thought the entire Clan knew that he was nearing the end of them. Jaggedtail set out into the forest, attempting to hunt and catch some prey for the slowly dwindling fresh-kill pile. He was currently on a hunting party with Rabbitwing, Branchfur, Breezefall and Flamewhisker.

It had been two moons since the death of Daisyfern and Elmheart was named deputy in her place. Jaggedtail had to admit that Elmheart was a natural at it, but he also noticed that Elmheart's nightmares seemed to have gotten worse. When Jaggedtail attempted to talk to him about it, Elmheart quickly changed the subject. Jaggedtail was starting to worry about his friend, he even talked to Maplepool about it.

Maplepool had said that she noticed as well, but he wouldn't talk to her either. Jaggedtail just hoped that it really was nothing, but Elmheart got incredibly defensive when confronted about it. *He won't let anyone help him.* Jaggedtail thought painfully. *I hope he'll be able to handle it, or let us in soon.*

Jaggedtail's hunt took him around the back of the camp, near the twolegpalce and the abandoned badger den. As he was tracking

prey, another scent picked up. It was a LichenClan cat, but the scent was heavily lined with fear. Jaggedtail lifted his head and spotted Sagefeather staring up towards the sky. Her eyes were so focused on something that Jaggedtail couldn't see.

The slow wind rustled her long gray pelt, Jaggedtail sensed that something was off about the old medicine cat. Jaggedtail stepped forward, approaching her slowly. "Sagefeather? Are you okay?"

Sagefeather slowly nodded. "Yes, Jaggedtail. I am okay." Her voice was low, it made Jaggedtail feel incredibly nervous.

"Are you sure? You're just sitting out here."

"I've spoken to StarClan, Jaggedtail." Sagefeather finally looked down. "Come here and let me tell you what they've said to me."

Jaggedtail felt confused and somewhat uncomfortable. "Why me? Why not Jumpstar? He's the leader, not me."

"Because I believe that you will benefit from these words the most." There was a sense of hopelessness deep in Sagefeather's pale green eyes. Jaggedtail could see that she needed someone, so Jaggedtail listened and sat down beside the medicine cat. "Thank you." She said quietly and turned her eyes back up towards the sky. "This will be the hardest leaf-bare any of us have ever seen." Sagefeather breathed out.

Jaggedtail tensed. "How so? Sickness?"

"Sickness, death, and something that I can't see." Sagefeather closed her eyes. "You will have to make a choice, Jaggedtail. This will be the hardest choice you've ever had to make, and it will completely change the fate of LichenClan." Jaggedtail stared intently at Sagefeather, trying to understand her words.

"What do you mean? What kind of choice?"

"I don't know, but you will when the time comes." Sagefeather replied.

"Is this what StarClan told you? They told you about this...choice?"

Sagefeather nodded. "You've struggled a lot, Jaggedtail. You've lost family, friends and this loss has shaped you into the cat you are today. I hope that in the end, you will make the choice you think is right." Jaggedtail didn't know what to say, he was completely shocked that StarClan was talking about *him* of all cats. *What choice will I have to make? Why is it so important? What if I make the wrong one?*

"I've lived such a long life." Sagefeather mewed, pulling Jaggedtail out of his thoughts. "I've mentored two apprentices, seen countless lives be created and countless lives end. Being a medicine cat was the right choice." It didn't seem like Sagefeather was even talking to Jaggedtail anymore, but she was speaking as if her life was coming to an end.

"What are you talking about?" Jaggedtail urged. "Why are you talking like this."
"Because, Jaggedtail." Sagefeather sighed. "I can feel the sickness creeping its way into my body. It's not bad, not yet anyway, but it will. My body is too old to fight greencough, even with the help of herbs."

Jaggedtail's heart twisted. "Sagefeather, you can't leave us, the Clan needs you."

Sagefeather shook her head slowly. "No, Jaggedtail. Maybe once, the Clan needed me but now they'll need Barkclaw. I've lived a good life, and I have no regrets." She closed her eyes. "Death won't be taking me today or even tomorrow, but before the snow melts my time will end in this forest, I shall fade away with the harsh leaf-bare ahead, and I am ready for it."

Jaggedtail couldn't believe what he was hearing. How could you be *ready* for death? Jaggedtail was terrified of death, how could anyone welcome it? "How are you able to handle this?"

"I've seen so much death, Jaggedtail." Sagefeather mewed. "It's my time, and it's Barkclaw's time to guide LichenClan into the future. Don't fear my death, Jaggedtail. I am happy to join the stars."

Jaggedtail didn't want to say goodbye to Sagefeather, she had been

medicine cat for such a long time. *What will LichenClan do without her?* It would be strange to have the Clan go on without their medicine cat, but Jaggedtail knew that Barkclaw would care for his Clan just as Sagefeather did.

Jaggedtail watched the passing clouds with Sagefeather in silence for quite a long time, after a while he decided he should return to camp. "Don't tell any cat what I've told you today." Sagefeather mewed as he left. "I don't want them to panic about my fate." Jaggedtail regretfully agreed, but continued on nonetheless. Jaggedtail returned to camp with his catch and apologized returning late, saying that he struggled to find prey in the spot that he had chosen. Not long after Jaggedtail returned, he spotted Sagefeather returning to her den as well. *Please, StarClan. When you take her, let it be peaceful.*

Jaggedtail spent his day by sharing some prey with Cherrypool, Brackenheart, Maplepool and Mossleaf. As they ate, he couldn't help but notice that Mossleaf wasn't as energetic as she usually was, as if something was on her mind. Jaggedtail wanted to ask, but he figured it wasn't his place.

They all wanted Elmheart to be with them, but he was out on patrol with Jumpstar, Breezefall, Hazelshine, Stormsong and Timberfall. They would return soon, but they were all too hungry to wait for Elmheart.

Jaggedtail's ears twitched as he heard the sound of kits playing, the nursery was now full of them. Ashstream had given birth to Tigerkit and Owlkit and Willowstrike had given birth to Foxwhisker's kits, Larkkit and Rustkit. Soon the apprentice den would be full once again, LichenClan needed apprentices, the den had been empty since Branchfur earned his warrior name.

The nursery wasn't the only thing that was full, the elder's den was full for the first time in Jaggedtail's life, the newest member being Jaggedtail's own father, Sunstorm. He had noticed that his father had aged, and he was happy that his father would be able to spend the rest of his days resting.

As the sun began to set on LichenClan, Jaggedtail couldn't help but

notice that Elmheart's patrol was taking a terribly long time. He hoped that everything was okay, he didn't want to sleep until they returned so he could make sure that his friend was okay. Just as he was about to call it a night, he heard movement at the camp's entrance.

The rest of the Clan had started to worry for the patrol as well, and as the patrol stepped into the camp Jaggedtail understood why they were gone for so long. The entire patrol was beaten abd battered, many of them covered in bloody wounds. Jaggedtail flattened his ears, he looked at Elmheart who led the patrol.

Elmheart was still standing tall, but he had a nasty claw mark in his side and he carried something on his back. Jaggedtail squinted to see what it was, only to discover the golden-brown pelt of Jumpstar. Jaggedtail's heart twisted. *No.* His throat tightened and he noticed that Timberfall was carrying another body, this one of Breezefall.

Jaggedtail and many others sprinted to the patrol while Owlheart got the medicine cats, Jaggedtail's legs began to tremble at the sight of the patrol. "What happened?" Jaggedtail breathed out, meeting Elmheart's gaze.

"A badger and her kit had moved into our territory." Elmheart explained, his voice raw. "They caught us off guard, Breezefall died almost instantly. Jumpstar died in the fight, it was his final life." All of LichenClan was stunned into silence. *Our leader is dead, so suddenly...and after he fought through greencough.*

Elmheart gently set Jumpstar's body besides Breeze Falls. Jaggedtail approached his friend. "Are you okay? That wound looks bad."

"I'm fine." Elmheart's voice was low, exhausted and defeated. "I did everything I could to save Jumpstar but I just--"

"He was old," Jaggedtail rested his tail on Elmheart's shoulders. "And he hadn't fully regained his strength from the sickness." Elmheart said nothing. Jaggedtail stared at his friend, with Jumpstar dead it meant that Elmheart would be leading LichenClan, fear burned deep in Elmheart's eyes. *He's scared.* Jaggedtail thought.

But I know that he will be a great leader.

The deaths of Jumpstar and Breezefall shook the Clan, especially those closest to them. Shorttail mourned his father, and it was so soon after the death of his sister. The same could be said for Willowstrike and Timberfall who were mourning the death of their father so soon after the death of their mother.

Before the vigil began, Elmheart faced the Clan. "I want nothing more than to share the vigil of Jumpstar and Breezefall with all of you, but LichenClan can't be left without a leader. Tonight, I will travel to the Moonstone with Barkclaw and receive my nine lives." Elmheart spoke boldly, but his eyes revealed fear.

Jaggedtail looked at Sagefeather who watched from the medicine cat den. *She's not going with them, she's letting Barkclaw go instead.* He thought painfully, remembering their conversation earlier. Jaggedtail along with Maplepool approached Elmheart before he left.

"You've got this, my love." Maplepool purred into Elmheart's ear. "We will be waiting for you."

"Thank you." Elmheart nuzzled Maplepool before turning to Jaggedtail. "You know what's going to happen when I return, right?"

Jaggedtail nodded. "Yes, and I'm ready. I know you'll be a wonderful leader, Elmheart. LichenClan is lucky to have you as our leader."

"I hope so." Elmheart breathed out. "I should leave, the night won't last forever. Keep an eye on the Clan for me." Elmheart gave Jaggedtail a nod before Barkclaw joined his side and Elmheart vanished out of camp.

"He's going to be different when he returns, you know that right?" Maplepool returned, her eyes cast after where Elmheart had left.

"I know." Jaggedtail replied. "But I know he can do it, he's wanted this his whole life."

"And are you ready to be deputy?"

Jaggedtail nodded slowly. "I think so, I want nothing more than to be by his side while he leads."

Maplepool and Jaggedtail returned to the vigil, but Jaggedtail found it hard to focus. He knew Elmheart would return completely differently, but he was excited. He was also terrified, Jumpstar's and Breezefall's deaths were just the beginning of the terrible leaf-bare that Sagefeather had warned him about.

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When Jaggedtail woke up, it was just past dawn. He blinked sleep out of his eyes, had Elmheart returned yet? He stood up in his nest, stretching out his forelegs. He climbed out of the warriors den from his spot beside Cherrypool and stepped into the cold morning outside. His eyes scanned the camp, most of the Clan was still sleeping. He crossed the snowy camp to the leader's den and climbed to the top, hoping that his friend would be inside.

Sure enough, he spotted Elmheart's form inside the den. He wasn't sleeping, he was just staring at his paws. "Good morning." Jaggedtail spoke, he was surprised to see Elmheart jump. "How did it go?"

"It went well." He flicked his tail. "I have nine lives and was named Elmstar before LichenClan, though I haven't seen any other cats besides Barkclaw yet, and now you."

"Then allow me to welcome you as Elmstar first." Jaggedtail dipped his head.

Elmstar nodded slowly. "Thank you, Jaggedtail. And once the Clan has woken up, I will be naming you as my deputy, if you still want to that is."

"That's all I want, Elmstar." Jaggedtail assured him. "I'll always be by your side, and as your deputy I will help you lead no matter what."

"Thank you, I needed to hear that." Elmstar sighed. "Being leader is a lot more terrifying than it seemed when I was kit, the whole Clan

is depending on me now and I can't lead them wrong."

"You'll be fine, Elmstar. You're not doing this alone, you have me, Maplepool, Mossleaf, Cherrypool, Brackenheart and Sunstorm all cheering for you. Not to mention Mosswing, Fawnsky, Robinkit and Redpaw from StarClan." Elmstar's mood seemed slightly elevated from his words.

"I'm not supposed to talk about it, but I saw all of them you know." Elmstar looked at Jaggedtail his eyes flooding with love. The thought of seeing Redpaw again made Jaggedtail's heart ache. "They miss you."

Jaggedtail nodded slowly. "I miss them too." He swallowed his emotions. "Thank you, Elmstar."

The two of them spoke until LichenClan was active and out, they were all waiting to see their brand new leader. Jaggedtail stepped out alongside Elmstar who faced the Clan. He jumped on the High Stump for the very first time. "Let all cats old enough to catch their own prey gather around the High Stump for a Clan meeting!"

Those words had been spoken so many times before, but never before by Elmstar. He said them so perfectly, like he had been born to say them. "My trip to the Moonstone was successful, I received nine lives and the name Elmstar."

"Elmstar! Elmstar!" The cats of LichenClan cheered their new leader.

"As my first duty as the new leader, I must name the new deputy of LichenClan." All eyes rested on Jaggedtail, as no cat would be surprised by Elmstar's choice. "I say these words before the spirit of StarClan so they may hear and approve my choice, Jaggedtail will be the new deputy of LichenClan."

"Thank you, Elmstar." Jaggedtail spoke up, knowing he had to say something. "As my best friend, my brother, and now as my leader I dedicate my service as deputy to you."

"Jaggedtail! Jaggedtail!" Despite everyone knowing, Jaggedtail still felt the love from his Clanmates as they cheered his name.

Jaggedtail faced Elmstar, they now led the Clan together. Jaggedtail had dreamt of this day before, but it was finally a reality. As long as Jaggedtail had Elmstar by his side, he knew that they could do anything.

Chapter 39

"Shorttail, I want you to lead a hunting patrol near the AshClan border." Jaggedtail began. "Take Hazelshine, Fieldfoot, Timberfall and Mousethorn. Cherrypool, I want you to lead a border patrol on the MoonClan border take Foxwhisker, Owlheart, Rabbitwing, Mossleaf and Maplepool. When you all get back come see more for the later patrols." The cats that he had assigned set out on their patrols and Jaggedtail was left to try and plan out the rest of the patrols for the day.

Jaggedtail found being a deputy came naturally to him, he enjoyed planning out all the patrols of the day. He had been deputy for just over a moon and he had adjusted to it quite well. He enjoyed leading alongside Elmstar, who had also been born to be leader. The cats of LichenClan looked up to him.

Leaf-bare continued to claim the forest, and as Sagefeather predicted, it wasn't going to be long and hard. Amberflame, Gingerdust and Dustclaw had all lost their lives to sickness and Jaggedtail could sense that they weren't the only ones. The one that Jaggedtail feared the most was Sunstorm, his elderly father was incredibly sick and couldn't even move from his nest. Jaggedtail knew that Sunstorm wouldn't survive the season, and it tore him apart.

As Jaggedtail spoke to his father, Sunstorm told him not to fear. Sunstorm had accept his death and told Jaggedtail he had lived a long good life. Despite all this, Jaggedtail still didn't want to lose his father. *I won't let Sunstorm's death destroy me, however.* Jaggedtail told himself. *He got to know Brackenheart so well, and he gave me a wonderful life. Plus, Fawnsky is waiting for him.*

The other cat Jaggedtail was certain wouldn't survive was Sagefeather. As she told him, Sagefeather had grown sick as well. It was up to Barkclaw to care for the Clan, usually Stormsong would help but the former medicine cat had grown sick as well. *This will be the hardest leaf-bare any of us have ever seen.* Her words echoed in

Jaggedtail's ears, he knew that this was only the beginning. So far five cats had died, three from sickness and two from the badger and Jaggedtail knew there would be so many more.

While he waited for patrols to return, Jaggedtail went to talk to Elmstar who was in his den. "Hey there," He greeted. "Having fun?"

"Not really." Elmstar chuckled. "It doesn't really feel like anything has changed." He admitted. "I have nine lives and a big den all to myself now, but I still feel like the old me."

"That's because you are still the old you." Jaggedtail mewed, nudging his friend. "You may have nine new lives, but you're still my best friend. You're still Maplepool's mate and you're still Mossleaf's father." Elmstar didn't respond, but he did seem to relax slightly. "I know you don't want to tell me what's been eating at you, but know that I am here for you. I'm your deputy, your best friend and your brother. You can always depend on me, even if you don't tell me just know that I am here for you."

"Thank you, Jaggedtail." Elmstar nodded. "I'm doing better, actually." For some reason, Jaggedtail didn't believe that. "But I would like some fresh-air." Together, Jaggedtail and Elmstar climbed out of the leaders den and into the camp where they grabbed a mouse to share. As they bit into their prey, Jaggedtail noticed movement coming from the medicine cat den. He lifted his head and saw Barkclaw step into the camp, his amber eyes filled with sadness. *Oh no.* Jaggedtail's heart twisted. *Who died?* Jaggedtail questioned, fearing that it was his father.

"Attention, LichenClan." Barkclaw raised his voice to address the Clan, the cats that remained in the camp looked towards their medicine cat. "It is with an extremely heavy heart that I tell you all that Sagefeather has passed." Sadness clouded over LichenClan once more, Jaggedtail dropped his head. He knew this would be coming, and yet he didn't prepare for it. "As she passed she gave me a message to pass onto her Clanmates." Barkclaw cleared his throat. "She said to not mourn her, she lived a life that was full and had no regrets. She loved serving her Clan and she wanted to assure us that even though this leaf-bare will be hard, it will not be the end of LichenClan. We will survive."

Together, the cats of LichenClan shared a long moment of silence for Sagefeather. Most all of the cats in the Clan had known Sagefeather their entire lives, and for a moment Jaggedtail remembered Birdstar. Birdstar had been even older than Sagefeather at her death. The LichenClan that Jaggedtail was born into was completely different than the one now, he had seen the deaths of medicine cats, deputies and leaders.

He looked at the nursery, remembering when he had been just a kit in the leaf-bare. Robinkit had just passed and he stared out into the camp wondering what his life would bring. *It certainly brought so many unexpected events.* He flicked his ears. *But they've shaped me into who I am now.*

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That night, the Clan held vigil for Sagefeather as she passed onto the stars. Jaggedtail felt like there had been so many vigils lately, and there had been. This wouldn't be the last one either, as the sun began to rise upon Sagefeather's still body. Jaggedtail decided to plan out the dawn patrol before getting some sleep.

He chose cats that had slept before, making sure they would be able to handle it and ended up sending out Foxwhisker, Flamewhisker, Branchfur, Hazelshine and Timberfall. Jaggedtail returned to his nest, curling up beside his beautiful mate Cherrypool. Jaggedtail found sleep hard, and ended up waking up just before sunhigh. Cherrypool and many other warriors had already risen, so Jaggedtail was glad that he had decided the rest of the patrols before heading out.

Jaggedtail stood up and left the den to see that despite the loss of Sagefeather, LichenClan was still working hard to keep their spirits high. While the patrols were out, Jaggedtail decided to take his own solo hunting mission to hopefully clear his head. He found himself thinking about what Sagefeather had told him, about the choice he would soon have to make. He had no idea what it could be, but he was terrified of making the wrong one.

He knew that most of the territory was pretty well covered when it came to hunting, but there was one spot in the territory that was

rarely tread upon. The area right beside the twolegplace. Jaggedtail began travelling that way, remembering when he took Foxwhisker here as an apprentice and encountered Rowanfang. He hoped that he wouldn't encounter him again.

Jaggedtail neared the twolegplace and began searching for prey, but it wasn't mouse that he caught a scent of, it was Mossleaf. *What's she doing out here?* Jaggedtail wondered, he could see her pawsteps in the snow leading towards the twolegplace. *Maybe she's hunting, but it doesn't seem like she's stopped.*

Letting his curiosity take the lead, Jaggedtail followed Mossleaf's scent and pawprints towards the twolegplace. Her scent grew stronger and stronger but Jaggedtail was just about out of LichenClan territory now. Confused, Jaggedtail looked around for his niece but couldn't spot her.

"--its so hard." Jaggedtail heard a faint voice speak, it was close to where he stood and the voice belonged to Mossleaf.

"I'm sorry," Another voice spoke, this one completely unfamiliar. "I wish I could be there to support you."

"It's okay," Mossleaf purred. "Seeing you here is good enough for now." *Who is she talking to?* Jaggedtail followed the sound of their voices and finally spotted Mossleaf, she was sitting under the shelter of an old, twisted oak tree. Beside her was an unfamiliar black tom, he had a white chest and muzzle, paws and tail tip. The collar around his neck revealed him to be a kittypet.

Mossleaf was curled up against him, her eyes filled with love and care. *Mossleaf is seeing a kittypet!* Jaggedtail thought with shock. *I have to say something.* Jaggedtail stepped forward. "Mossleaf." He spoke her name sternly.

Mossleaf's eyes went wide and she jumped to her paws, facing Jaggedtail in horror. "J-Jaggedtail!" She shouted. "H-How long have you been there?" The kittypet stood up as well, his entire body going rigid.

"Not very long, but long enough to figure out what's going on. Who

is this kittypet?" Jaggedtail demanded.

"Please, please don't tell my father!" Mossleaf pleaded, she was clearly terrified.

"Who is he?" Jaggedtail repeated his question.

Mossleaf was still borderline hysterical so it was the kittypet who stepped forward. "My name is Spade." He explained. "I really don't mean you any harm."

He's bold for a kittypet, most of them would have ran away from a warrior like me. Jaggedtail thought. "You're awfully close to LichenClan territory, and Mossleaf, you clearly have feelings for this tom."

Mossleaf dropped her ears. "I know it's wrong, but--" She looked up pitfully. "I can't help it, Jaggedtail." She cast her green gaze towards Spade. "He makes me happy." Jaggedtail could see in their eyes that the two of them really did like each other. "But you *can't* tell, Elmstar!" She begged again. "He *hates* kittypets! He would shred both of our pelts if he found out."

Jaggedtail sighed, he didn't like the thought of keeping secrets from Elmstar. "Mossleaf, he is a kittypet and you are a warrior."

"But he wants to join the Clan!" Mossleaf exclaimed taking Jaggedtail by surprise. "He wants to come live with me and learn how to be a warrior!"

Jaggedtail looked at Spade. "Is this true?"

Spade nodded. "It is, from the moment I first saw Mossleaf, I knew that I wanted to be with her. No matter how hard it is."
"I don't think you quite understand *just* how hard it is." Jaggedtail flicked his tail, a kittypet could never understand the struggles that warriors went through. He turned his attention back on Mossleaf. "You can't keep sneaking out of the Clan like this, what if it had been Elmstar who found you instead of me?" Mossleaf flattened her ears. "Look, Mossleaf." He stepped closer to the she-cat. "I want you to be happy, I really do, but a kittypet becoming a warrior is

unheard of."

"Please, Jaggedtail." Mossleaf whimpered. "He wants to be with me, and I want to be with him."

"It's not my choice, Mossleaf." Jaggedtail reminded her. "It's your father's, I know you don't want to tell him, but he loves you. Perhaps he will show some kindness to Spade. You never know unless you talk to him."

Mossleaf looked at Spade for a long moment, then back to Jaggedtail. "I guess I could try, but what if he says no? I don't want to say goodbye to Spade!"

"We'll figure it out from there," Jaggedtail turned to Spade. "We will be discussing this, if Elmstar says yes then I will guide you back to LichenClan myself."

"Thank you, Jaggedtail." Spade dipped his head, Jaggedtail was honestly impressed with the kittypet's composure. *He definitely isn't a coward like most kittypets, but still. I don't know how Elmstar will handle this.*

"Bye, Spade." Mossleaf said quietly. "Hopefully I'll see you later." Jaggedtail could see that Mossleaf's hopes were low. Part of Jaggedtail wished he had never come out here, if he hadn't caught them then they could hold onto their happiness for a while yet, but it was bound to come out eventually.

"How long have you been seeing him?" Jaggedtail questioned Mossleaf.

"About four moons now." Mossleaf replied. "I was hunting over here and he saw me, he wasn't scared or anything he just came up and say hi. We got to talking and I kept visiting him ever since, I wasn't expecting to fall in love with him." She flattened her ears. "I don't know what I'll do if Elmstar says no."

"We'll just have to see." Jaggedtail did his best to keep her spirits high, but his were low as well.

The two of them reached camp and Jaggedtail took Mossleaf to

Elmstar's den, he was already in there with Maplepool. *Both her parents are going to find out.* Jaggedtail thought. "Hello there." Maplepool purred. "Need something?"

"Yes actually." Jaggedtail nodded, both he and Mossleaf sitting down in the den. "Go on," Jaggedtail nudged Mossleaf.

Elmstar looked at his daughter intently, his amber gaze curious. Mossleaf took a deep breath. "Elmstar..." She began. "For the past four moons I've been...seeing a kittypet."

"*What?*" Elmstar's fur stood on edge, Jaggedtail lifted his tail to try and calm him down.

"Let her explain." Elmstar glared at Jaggedtail but kept quiet.

"His name is Spade and he is...wonderful. He's so sweet and amazing and...he wants to join the Clan."

Maplepool looked at Mossleaf in shock, but it wasn't the same anger that Elmstar had. "Absolutely not." Elmstar growled. Jaggedtail could see the pain spread across Mossleaf's entire body.

"But--"

"No buts!" Elmstar roared, standing up and towering over his daughter. "I said no! A kittypet could never survive in this world! They're selfish and lazy! Kittypets aren't even worth the time of day!" Jaggedtail stared at Elmstar, he had no idea that Elmstar hated kittypets *that* much.

"That's not fair!" Mossleaf cried.

"I don't care about fair!" Elmstar shouted. "I am your father *and* your leader and I'm saying that kittypet will *never* step foot into LichenClan territory!" Mossleaf winced and cowered down to the floor.

"Elmstar," Maplepool spoke up, standing up beside her mate. "Perhaps you shouldn't be so harsh."

"No!" Elmstar lashed his tail. "Warriors don't interact with kittypets,

and I won't have you seeing that disgusting cat again."

"He's not disgusting!" Mossleaf cried.

"*Silence!*" Mossleaf closed her eyes, Jaggedtail felt horrible he didn't think Elmstar would react like *this.* "You won't be leaving camp without an escort from now on, until I'm sure you've forgotten about this kittypet."

"I'm not an apprentice!" Mossleaf wailed. "You can't do this to me!"

"I already have, no go! You *better* stay in camp." Without another word, Mossleaf sprinted out of the leader's den leaving the three warriors.

"Elmstar," Maplepool spoke again, this time more bold. "That was a little much, don't you think? She's young and in love, you can't make her feel like that!"
"I don't care." Elmstar growled. "I will not have a kittypet in this Clan." He didn't even look at Maplepool, but he rested his eyes on Jaggedtail. "How long have you known about this?"

"I just found out today." Jaggedtail explained. "But you were far too rough on her, Elmstar. I've met this kittypet and he's nothing like Rowan--"

"Don't say that traitors name!" Jaggedtail winced at Elmstar's raised voice. "She's my daughter and I won't have her being mates with a kittypet. If it was your kits would you let them be mates with a cat like that?"

Jaggedtail tensed up. "Yes." He mewed bodly, looking Elmstar directly in the eyes. "If Redpaw was still here I would let him have any mate he wanted."

Elmstar's eyes flashed with pain for a moment. "Jaggedtail--"

Jaggedtail had enough. "Think about what you've done, Elmstar." Jaggedtail hissed. "Do you really want your only daughter to look at you as a source of pain and fear?" With that, Jaggedtail left the den and approached Mossleaf who was incredibly distraught outside the warriors den.

"Mossleaf--"
"Don't talk to me." Mossleaf growled, not turning around to face him. "If you wouldn't have brought me here he would never know, now I'll never get to be with Spade. Just leave me alone." Jaggedtail could sense the pain in her voice, he wished he could take it away. *I wish I never found them.* Jaggedtail thought. *I just want her to be happy.*

Chapter 40

Jaggedtail walked beside Cherrypool, the snow biting at his paws. He felt a heavy weight on his shoulders that had been there for almost a moon now. *I want this season to be over.* Jaggedtail thought, Sagefeather's warning continued to come true. Not only did Mossleaf hate both him and Elmstar after Elmstar told her that she could never see Spade again, but Sunstorm's life had been claimed by greencough about a half-moon ago.

Jaggedtail forced through the grief and continued to serve his Clan as deputy, but he still felt at odds with Elmstar since that day. *I feel like everything's falling apart.* Jaggedtail thought, he just wanted everything to return to normal, but they still had at least a moon of leaf-bare left and anything could happen.

Currently, Jaggedtail was leading a border patrol along the MoonClan border. With him was Cherrypool, Hazelshine, Rabbitwing and Twigheart. For some reason, Elmstar had been demanding more and more patrols constantly. Jaggedtail didn't know what was wrong with Elmstar, but he seemed so jumpy and paranoid all the time. *What's happening to him?* Jaggedtail wondered constantly, and he didn't know how to help he was still upset with Elmstar for rejecting Spade.

The more he thought about it, the more that Jaggedtail thought that LichenClan could use a cat like Spade, they were losing a lot of warriors. *We need all the support we can get.* Jaggedtail thought, but Elmstar would never listen to him.

Jaggedtail finished up the patrol and went to plan out of the rest of the days patrols, including the dawn patrol for tomorrow. Tonight was the gathering so he had to make sure that everything was planned out for when he got home. *I should also chose the cats for the gathering...* Jaggedtail thought and began running through cats in his head.

"Jaggedtail!" Elmstar's voice broke his concentration and Jaggedtail

looked up to Elmstar's den where the leader was calling him. "I need to talk to you." His voice sounded strained and stressed out. *What's up with him?*

Jaggedtail stood up and quickly crossed the camp to his leaders den, assuming that Elmstar didn't want to wait for him. He climbed up into the den and was a little shocked at the state of it. Elmstar and Maplepool both slept in there, but Elmstar's nest was shredded as if he had been clawing at it. "What did you need?" Jaggedtail questioned, forcing his attention to his friend.

"StarClan have shown me a dark vision." Elmstar began, causing Jaggedtail to tense. *Was it the same thing they showed Sagefeather?*

"What is it?"

"LichenClan is in danger," Elmstar was pacing quickly throughout his den, his eyes wild and stressed. "LichenClan is losing a lot of warriors, and the other Clans are going to attack us because of it."

"What?" Elmstar tilted his head. "The other Clans barely bother us, are you sure--"

"I know what I saw." Elmstar interrupted. "It was a vision, of countless cats rushing into our camp. Destroying our Clan and taking everything from us. StarClan showed me this vision so that I can protect our Clan, I will not let LichenClan fall under my rule!"

Jaggedtail could sense how deeply disturbed Elmstar was. *I don't doubt StarClan, but would the other Clans really try and invade us? Surely not...* "What are we going to do about this?"

"I'm going to prove that LichenClan is still strong! I will show all of the other Clans that messing with LichenClan would be the biggest mistakes of their lives!"

--

Jaggedtail felt incredibly disturbed by his earlier conversation with Elmstar, he had no idea how he was going to prove LichenClan's strength, but he assumed it would have something to do with a battle. *Just don't turn into Cloudstar.* Jaggedtail pleaded, he had to be

there to support Elmstar and to try and calm him down.

The warriors of LichenClan travelled to the gathering hollow, Elmstar took the lead and Jaggedtail was by his side as always, he could sense just how tense his leader was. Jaggedtail had forgotten about their argument about Spade because he could see just how badly Elmstar needed him.

As they reached the gathering hollow, Elmstar walked ahead of Jaggedtail leaving him behind the crowd. *What is he doing?* Jaggedtail wondered, trying to keep up with his leader but the other Clans had already arrived. As they began Jaggedtail was still apart from his leader and unable to sit with his leader, so he just sat down with Cherrypool as to not cause an interruption.

Before they began, Jaggedtail noticed how rigid Branchfur looked, he looked at the young warrior and noticed he had a hate filled gaze directed at the SunClan medicine cat Poppyfur. *What's that all about?* Jaggedtail wondered but didn't have time to think about it before Foxstar began speaking.

"First off, Stormwind gave birth to a healthy kit and Lakeflight should be giving birth soon as well. Despite the cold, SunClan is thriving well and we haven't had any sickness." Foxstar sat back down, but Jaggedtail couldn't help but notice that the SunClan leader's voice was hoarse. *Is he sick?* Jaggedtail wondered.

"Good to hear." Ivystar nodded. "AshClan is also doing well, we don't have much to report other than that we haven't had any sickness either and we have enough prey." Ivystar nodded to Cloudstar who stood up next. Jaggedtail watched Elmstar intently, his claws shredding the bark beneath his paws. *He's stressing out.* Jaggedtail thought with fear.

"MoonClan is doing well, we are sad to announce the death of Silverpool." The Clans held a moment of silence. "We have sickness, but it's under control."

"Your turn, Elmstar." Ivystar motioned towards Elmstar and Jaggedtail could see just how stressed his leader was. *What is he going to do?*

"My only announcement is to the other Clans." Elmstar spoke, his voice loud and bold. Jaggedtail tensed and he looked at Maplepool in fear. *Don't do this.* "Since I was young, LichenClan have been at odds with MoonClan, simply because they don't know how to forgive or forget." Jaggedtail's jaw dropped. *Is he really bringing that up? He's the one who ended that fight!*

"You started that war yourself, Elmstar." Cloudstar growled.

"And you had continue it, Cloudstar." Elmstar lashed his tail. "We've had battles with MoonClan and AshClan alike, you want to hold grudges so I can do it too. You've messed with LichenClan one too many times!" The cats of the other Clans were getting angered and began hissing insults at Elmstar.

"What is he doing?" Maplepool whispered under her breath. "Is he really bringing up old battles? Is he *trying* to start a fight?" *I'm going to prove that LichenClan is still strong! I will show all of the other Clans that messing with LichenClan would be the biggest mistakes of their lives!* Elmstar's words echoed in Jaggedtail's ears. *That's exactly what he wants.*

"There's one Clan here who hasn't dared attack us." Elmstar was now looking at Foxstar. *Why would he start a fight with SunClan? They haven't done anything to us!* "I don't want you thinking you're safe. You have to know that LichenClan is a force to be reckoned with."

"I hope you're not threatening my Clan." Foxstar's voice was dangerously calm, his green eyes sparked with anger.

"And if I am?" Elmstar bared his teeth.

"Then you'll regret it." There was a dangerous edge to Foxstar's voice. "You are a young leader, since you have nine lives you think you can do whatever you want. You think you can win any battle or fight any war. If you think like that then your nine lives will be gone before you can blink." Foxstar jumped down. "If you try and fight me and my Clan you will lose, Elmstar. SunClan! We're leaving!"

"Run away, Foxstar!" Elmstar taunted. "I'll see you on the battlefield! I won't lose!"

"You're insane, Elmstar." Cloudstar growled.

"No, Cloudstar. I'm a fearless leader who will drive LichenClan into a life of victory!"

--

"You want to explain to me what that was?" Jaggedtail demanded when he and Elmstar returned to camp. "What in the name of StarClan were you thinking?"

"I told you, Jaggedtail." Elmstar growled. "StarClan showed me what will happen if I don't act and I refuse to let that happen!" Elmstar tore away from Jaggedtail and moved to the High Stump, he jumped on the surface but there was no need to call for a meeting as all of LichenClan was waiting for an explanation. "Cats of LichenClan! I know you are confused by what I said tonight, but I will explain. StarClan has shown me a dark vision of our future, and if I don't act then LichenClan will destroyed!" Gasps spread throughout the entire Clan, but Jaggedtail was starting to question Elmstar's "vision". " I challenged SunClan because StarClan showed me that LichenClan will fall if I don't show the Clans what we are capable of."

"Is this really the way?" Hazelshine spoke up from the crowd.

"Of course it is!" Branchfur called. "Do you really doubt our leader or StarClan?"

No cat wanted to say that, but Jaggedtail could certainly see some of them were questioning his choice as well. "In two days time we will lead an attack on SunClan and prove to them how strong LichenClan is!"

Elmstar jumped down and faced Jaggedtail. "Are you sure this is a good idea?"

Elmstar nodded. "I am positive." His eyes burned intently. "You either follow me and fight by my side or I will do this without you,

that is your choice Jaggedtail."

My choice. Jaggedtail tensed. *Is this the choice Sagefeather warned me about?* Jaggedtail took a deep breath, he knew what he had to do, he had to keep Elmstar in check. "I'll follow you."

Chapter 41

The past two days had been spent training and preparing for the upcoming battle. Jaggedtail's nerves were out of control with each passing moment. He didn't want to fight this battle, there was no reason to. No reason to shed the blood of innocent SunClan and LichenClan warriors, lives could be lost and for nothing, because of some nightmare that Elmstar had. Jaggedtail had made his choice, however, he would follow his leader no matter what. *I need to be there, I need to help keep Elmstar from doing something stupid.*

It was the day of the battle and Jaggedtail was frantically running around to see if everything was ready. He crossed the camp to the medicine cat den and poked his head inside to see if Barkclaw was ready, the medicine cat would be staying near the SunClan border to treat any serious wounded cats.

"Do you have everything that you need?" Jaggedtail questioned, he looked over the sick cats that were still resting in the nests.

"You mean other than a leader with a speck of intelligence?" Barkclaw lashed his tail, looking over his shoulder at Jaggedtail with anger deep in his eyes. "You know as well as I do that this battle is a mousebrained idea, Jaggedtail."

Jaggedtail sighed. "The word of the Clan leader is the warrior code, Barkclaw. We must follow Elmstar."

Barkclaw shook his head. "You warriors all take an oath to defend your Clan even at the cost of your life, do you know what oath medicine cats take?" Jaggedtail shook his head slowly. "We vow to stand apart from rivalry between Clan and Clan and to protect all cats equally." Fighting in pointless battles like this goes against everything that I believe in, I will follow Elmstar but I do not trust him. From Birdstar to Jumpstar we lived in an era of peace, yes MoonClan led a war against us but that was Cloudstar's doing, not ours. Suddenly Elmstar takes over and we are thrust into an unjust battle." Barkclaw gathered his herbs. "Maybe it's time to ask

yourself, should we really follow a leader like this?"

Without another word, Barkclaw pushed past Jaggedtail to meet with the rest of the Clan. He left Jaggedtail feeling incredibly conflicted. *Elmstar is my best friend, I would do anything for him.* Jaggedtail reminded himself. *Would you allow your Clan to be destroyed for him?* A voice spoke inside Jaggedtail's head, he shook his head to ignoring it. *I've made my choice.*

Jaggedtail left the medicine cat den and approached the center of Clan where the cats of LichenClan were starting to gather. Elmstar left his den, his eyes burning with a deep fury. Jaggedtail took a deep breath and padded to his friends' side. The Clan was already gathered but Elmstar jumped up on the High Stump. "The time is upon us LichenClan!" Elmstar shouted, his voice echoing throughout the trees. It's time to show every single Clan in this forest that LichenClan will no longer hide in the shadows, we will make our presence and our threat known."

Jaggedtail stood up, he had to make something very clear. "You all know where you're supposed to be. Remember your training and please remember, we're not attacking SunClan to kill them." He could feel Elmstar glaring at him, but Jaggedtail kept his head high. Once the final preparations were in order, the Clan set out into the darkened forest.

Jaggedtail walked beside Elmstar as he always had, he noticed Elmstar turning to face him. "You're with me the whole way, right?" Elmstar questioned, his amber eyes glinting in the moonlight.

"Always." Jaggedtail have a small nod, despite the raging anxiety in his chest, Jaggedtail stayed by his leader's side. The cats of LichenClan crossed into the gathering hollow, which would lead to SunClan territory. Jaggedtail had never seen the trees of SunClan, none of them had any idea where their camp was, but they would find it soon enough.

Jaggedtail had spent the prior days planning out the best attack strategy with the best chance for no loss of life. He had sent two patrols to go around the opposite edges of the camp while Elmstar and Jaggedtail would lead the frontal assault directly into the heart

of SunClan camp. The rest of the warriors would come in as backup, swarming the SunClan warriors. He hoped this plan would make the SunClan warriors defend, but it would show Elmstar that they couldn't beat LichenClan and he would stop his ramblings about his dreams.

He cast a glance at Brackenheart and Cherrypool, they were both in the side attack and he prayed that they would come out of this unharmed. He spotted Ashstream and Willowstrike both in the patrol as well, Elmstar had insisted that both queens join the battle despite having kits still in the nursery, instead the kits went with the elders while they're mothers were fighting. Jaggedtail really didn't agree with that, but again he didn't argue with Elmstar.

LichenClan reached the river that separated the gathering hollow from SunClan territory, Elmstar lifted his tail as a signal for the Clan to stop. "From this moment forward we will be in unfamiliar territory." He spoke. "We will be following the strongest scents of SunClan in order to find their camp, keep silent and keep your senses high." With that, Elmstar crossed the steppings stone and Jaggedtail followed.

The Clan kept completely silent as they moved through the oak forest, it kind of reminded Jaggedtail of his own territory but not nearly as thick. The scent of SunClan was strong, but it smelled better than the fishyness of MoonClan or the pine needles of AshClan. Jaggedtail stayed by Elmstar's side as they crept through SunClan territory.

The scent grew stronger and stronger and Jaggedtail caught a recent trail of scent. He tapped Elmstar with his tail and motioned with his head towards the trail. Elmstar gave a tiny nod and led the Clan in that direction. As they crested a small hill, Jaggedtail saw the camp. It was a small hollow with a tall stone wall in the back. The most notable feature was the giant, leafless tree in the center of the camp, it's roots twisting away to form what looked like a den. *I'll bet my prey thats the leader's den.*

Jaggedtail turned to the rest of the Clan, meeting the eyes of Fieldfoot and Twigheart, the cats he had chosen to lead the battle patrols. He gave them a not and both warriors gathered their cats to

prepare for the attack. Jaggedtail met Cherrypool's gaze as she passed, she gave him an encouraging nod and Jaggedtail took a deep breath. They gave the warriors a few moments to get into position.

Jaggedtail looked at Elmstar who was focused in on the three cats who were sitting guard. Two in the front and one near what looked like a back entrance to the camp in the stone wall. The cats were Rockfall, Sandfoot and Slateclaw. "You ready?" Jaggedtail whispered, only loud enough for Elmstar to hear.

Elmstar nodded and with a wave of his tail, the warriors of LichenClan were swarming the SunClan camp. Jaggedtail met the eyes of Sandfoot and jumped on the calico she-cat, slamming her body into the floor of the hollow. "SunClan!" Slateclaw's voice range out from behind the camp. "SunClan! LichenClan is attacking!" At his call, it didn't take long for the rest of SunClan's warriors to join the battle.

Jaggedtail focused only on Sandfoot, he battered at her mottled pelt while she lashed out with her ginger paws. Sandfoot's claws raked down Jaggedtail's foreleg, he hissed in pain and reared up on his hind paws, bringing his forepaws down hard on Sandfoot's chest. She let out a choked cry of pain before rolling away.

"Get away from her!" Another cry filled the air and Jaggedtail felt a cat leap onto his back. Claws like thorns sank into his pelt, he yowled in fury and quickly dropped onto his back, pinning his attacker under his greater weight. Jaggedtail saw Sandfoot coming in for an attack on his belly so he jumped back onto his paws and met her attack with a slash of claws across her chest.

Jaggedtail whipped around to face the cat who had jumped on him, it was Applespots, Sandfoot's sister. Jaggedtail hissed and leapt towards Applespots, gripping his claws into her shoulders and tossing her aside. Sandfoot ran to her sister's side, giving Jaggedtail a moment to catch his breath. The once peaceful hollow was now filled with pained yowls and fury filled battle cries.

Jaggedtail had lost sight of Elmstar in the battle, most of the hollow was a blur of cats fighting violently. He could sense just how

terrible the battle was around him. *We need to find a way to end this quickly.* Jaggedtail thought, he left Sandfoot and Applespots to try and help his Clanmates. As he ran through the crowd he noticed the body of the SunClan warrior, Moonfur. Her cream-colored pelt was stained red and her eyes were glossed over. *No!* Jaggedtail thought painfully. *No lives were supposed to be lost!* Jaggedtail shook his head. *I need to find Elmstar.*

He pushed his way through the fighting cats as he heard a familiar cry, it was Cherrypool. Jaggedtail's heart twisted and he forgot about Elmstar for a moment, racing to help his mate. Cherrypool was facing two cats, Tigertail and Thornpelt. She had a bloody wound deep in her shoulder, and she was panting heavily. *I won't let you die!*

Jaggedtail let out a loud growl of anger and charged forward, using his strength to knock both toms to the ground. He met muzzle to muzzle with Thornpelt and sank his teeth deep into the pale tabby's shoulder. Thornpelt howled in pain and went directly for Jaggedtail's throat, Jaggedtail twisted away, letting go the tom. *Is he trying to kill me?* Tigertail came in for another attack behind Jaggedtail, going directly for his hind legs. Jaggedtail hissed and kicked backwards, his paw hitting Tigertail directly in the muzzle.

"Jaggedtail!" A pained cry called his name and Jaggedtail's heart twisted. Thornpelt had moved back onto Cherrypool, he had her pinned to the ground, his claw high in the air ready to come down and deliver the final blow. *No!* Jaggedtail filled with pure rage.

"If you kill her I'll rip you apart!" Jaggedtail shouted.

"Thornpelt stop!" Jaggedtail was surprised to hear Tigertail's booming voice shout over the caterwauls of battle. Thornpelt looked at Tigertail with rage in his amber eyes. "We aren't fighting to kill! That's not the warrior code, she's injured enough let her go and go help someone else!"

Thornpelt spat at Cherrypool but let her up, Jaggedtail ran to her side to make sure she was okay. He still had half a mind to tear Thornpelt apart but he didn't. Thornpelt growled at Tigertail before vanishing into the battle once more. "Unlike your leader, I'm not

here to kill." Tigertail growled at Jaggedtail. "Something tells me you don't want cats to die either, Jaggedtail. So let me ask you something, is this a battle that you wanted or are you just blindly following your leader?" Jaggedtail couldn't find any words, he just stared at Tigertail. The tabby flicked his tail and looked away. "Get your mate out of here before she gets hurt anymore." Without another word Tigertail vanished back into the fray.

"Come on." Jaggedtail helped Cherrypool to her paws and helped his mate through the battle out of the camp. "I'm sorry you got hurt." Jaggedtail apologized once they got away from the fighting for a moment.

"It's fine," Cherrypool looked at Jaggedtail, her green eyes burning. "But this fight isn't justified, we both know that cats are going to die unless we do something, unless *you* do something."

Jaggedtail flattened his ears. "I don't think I can do anything."

"The only cat that Elmstar will listen to is you, you have to stop this. Find him and put an end to this." Cherrypool touched her muzzle to Jaggedtail. "Go, I'll be fine." Jaggedtail gave his mate one last long look before running back into the battle, her words ringing in his mind.

As Jaggedtail ran through the battle he was suddenly slammed to the ground by a large tabby. Claws tore into his thick pelt and he felt his wounds welling with blood. Jaggedtail hissed and sank his teeth into the tom's shoulders, the tom tried to pull away but Jaggedtail's teeth only sank deeper.

The tom pressed his paw against Jaggedtail's throat, without claws, but pressing down and cutting off his air. Jaggedtail gagged and pulled back off the tom who stumbled away. Jaggedtail coughed as he regained his breath and faced the tom, it was Bramblepelt. Jaggedtail jumped forward, clawing at the tom's chest and face.

Jaggedtail unexpectedly felt weight on his back, similar to when Applespots attack him but this time the cat made him lose his balance and fall to the ground. Bramblepelt retreated back to his Clanmates and Jaggedtail faced his newest attacker, it was the pale

gray warrior Flowerpelt. "Why are you attacking my Clan?" She demanded. "You're killing my warriors! Your warriors are dying too!"

Jaggedtail tensed. *Who has died from LichenClan?* He stared at Flowerpelt, something about this cat spoke to him. Her green eyes were powerful and full of love and loss, what Jaggedtail felt inside as well. "I didn't want this to happen." Jaggedtail finally admitted. "But Elmstar is my leader and I have to follow his word."

"A leader doesn't go blindly into battles causing the deaths of innocent cats!" Flowerpelt shouted, causing Jaggedtail to wince. "Elmstar is a monster, Jaggedtail! I'm sure you can see that for yourself!" *Elmstar isn't a monster!* Jaggedtail thought, but he couldn't force his paws to move. *He's my friend.*

"Let this be a lesson!" Jaggedtail jumped slightly at the roaring voice of Foxstar. Jaggedtail spotted the ginger leader and Jaggedtail let out a cry as he realized what was at Foxstar's paws, it was Elmstar. The leader was unmoving, bleeding from a wound in his throat. *No.* Jaggedtail knew that Elmstar had nine lives, but there was something about watching his best friend die that caused him so much pain. "I don't care how young of a leader you are, if you challenge my Clan you will lose!"

Jaggedtail couldn't pull his gaze off Elmstar, he waited and waited for his friend to rise. *I knew this would happen! Why did we have to start this stupid fight?* After what seemed like forever, Elmstar's body twitched and he stood up, his entire body shaking. Before Elmstar could even gather his strength, Foxstar knocked him down with one mighty paw. *He can't fight anymore.* Jaggedtail thought painfully, he ran to his leader's side. He dropped down beside Elmstar looking him over. Elmstar's eyes were dazed and weak.

"Elmstar." Jaggedtail mewed desperately. "We have to retreat, we can't fight any longer." Elmstar lifted his head slightly and growled at Jaggedtail, he winced but stood his ground.

"Listen to your deputy, Elmstar." Jaggedtail heard Foxstar growl. "Gather your dead and get out of my territory."

"Very well." Elmstar growled, his voice pained and exhausted. Jaggedtail helped Elmstar to his paws and Elmstar shot a deadly glare at Foxstar. "But this isn't over, Foxstar." He spat. "LichenClan! Gather our dead, we're leaving!"

Chapter 42

LichenClan had suffered a heavy loss from the battle, after Elmstar called for the retreat they had found the bodies of Rabbitwing, Timberfall and Willowstrike. It was Willowstrike's death that truly struck a nerve with Jaggedtail, Elmstar had forced the nursing queen to fight and she lost her life. Ashstream had taken over caring for Larkkit and Rustkit, but her family was devastated.

A long vigil was held for all their fallen Clanmates, but Jaggedtail could feel the tension and a sense of anger from the entire Clan towards Elmstar. The words from Barkclaw, Tigertail, Cherrypool and Flowerpelt all rang through Jaggedtail's mind.

Maybe it's time to ask yourself, should we really follow a leader like this?

So let me ask you something, is this a battle that you wanted or are you just blindly following your leader?

The only cat that Elmstar will listen to is you, you have to stop this. Find him and put an end to this.

A leader doesn't go blindly into battles causing the deaths of innocent cats!

Jaggedtail hadn't slept the night before, he tossed and turned in his nest all night. Many cats were wounded, but none of them could stay in the medicine cat den due to the sick cats that still lay there. When Jaggedtail woke up that morning, he learned that Kestrelflame had died overnight and Barkclaw had many fears for the rest.

Leaf-bare isn't over. Jaggedtail thought painfully, recalling what Sagefeather had told him. *The hardest leaf-bare we have ever faced doesn't even begin to explain the loss that LichenClan has felt.* They had once been a large Clan full of strong and powerful warriors, the warriors den had been full and crowded but now it was looking

smaller and smaller everyday.

I made the wrong choice. Jaggedtail realized that night, he should have done everything he could to stop Elmstar, but he didn't and both LichenClan and SunClan had suffered heavy loss.

"Are you going to give us an explanation?" Jaggedtail heard the angered mew of Foxwhisker.

"You led our Clan into battle that *killed* our own warriors!" Owlheart chimed in. Jaggedtail turned around to see that Elmstar was facing the very angry Clan.

"I told all of you." Elmstar snarled, he looked like a cornered fox. Scared and ready to fight. "StarClan sent me a vision! I had to attack, to help keep our Clan safe!"

"You're going to destroy this Clan!" Flamewhisker added. "You led us into a violent battle!"

"I am your *leader*!" Elmstar roared.

"Would StarClan want you to leave my kits without their mother at only two moons old!" Foxwhisker's entire body shook with anger, and for good reason. The Clan was angry, and Jaggedtail was too. *I need to choose my Clan.* Jaggedtail thought with a flick of his tail, crossing the camp towards the crowd.

"They have a right to be angry, Elmstar." Jaggedtail spoke loudly, stepping through the crowd and facing Elmstar. "Three of our cats have died from the battle, and we've already lost Kestrelflame to sickness. How many more will we lose? We shouldn't be using more herbs on injured warriors, we should only be focusing on healing our sick ones!"

Elmstar stared down at Jaggedtail with pure anger and betrayal in his eyes. "Elmstar, you are my friend but I need to stand beside my Clan right now. If you attack another Clan, we will not follow you."

"Jaggedtail may I speak with you in my den, please?" Elmstar's voice was low and dangerous, but Jaggedtail kept his head high. He could feel Maplepool's eyes on him, he hadn't stopped to ask her

what she felt about all this, but now wasn't the time.

Jaggedtail stoically crossed the camp to Elmstar's den where both of them gathered inside. "You said you would *always* follow me!" Elmstar began shouting once they were alone.

"That was before I saw what that battle did to our Clan. Two kits, forced to live without their mother before they even left their sides. And you, Elmstar, you lost a life! If you keep rushing into battles like this you will lose the rest of them, you won't be a leader for long."

"I'll be the best leader that this forest has ever seen!" Elmstar bared his teeth. "LichenClan will be known as the most fearsome Clan in the whole forest!"
"LichenClan doesn't want that!" Jaggedtail shouted. "We don't want to live that life! We want to live in peace!"

"I am LichenClan's leader!" Elmstar's voice boomed and Jaggedtail was shocked as he slashed his paw forward, Jaggedtail ducked in time but stumbled backwards. He stared at Elmstar in shock, the leader trembled and his eyes were wide and crazed, filled with fury and pain.

Jaggedtail felt his heart breaking inside of his chest. *This isn't my friend, this is a power crazed cat.* "I'm leaving." Jaggedtail muttered under his breath and climbed down from the den with another word. He found the Clan waiting outside, they must have heard everything from all the yelling.

"You have to do something, Jaggedtail." Foxwhisker mewed. "Please."

"I need to think about this." Jaggedtail couldn't face the Clan right now, he needed to talk to Maplepool. He rushed across camp to find his sister.

"I heard yelling." Maplepool stared down at her paws, she looked up with pain in her eyes. "Jaggedtail, what's wrong with Elmstar? Why is he acting like this? It's like he became leader and went completely mad!"

"I don't know." Jaggedtail sighed, sitting down beside her. "But he's not the Elmstar we used to know, he's not Elmheart."

"I want him to be the cat I fell in love with." Maplepool whimpered. "I can't stand to watch him like this, I love him but I love my Clan too. What if I had died in that battle? Or Mossleaf? What would he do then?"

Jaggedtail once again thought of Redpaw, he didn't know if Elmstar would be able to handle losing a kit in the mental state that he was in. "I have no idea." Jaggedtail sighed. "But he needs to be stopped."

"How do we stop him?" Maplepool questioned. "Do you think you can convince him to calm down?"

"I don't think so." Jaggedtail's heart twisted, his stomach flipped in knots and a feeling of fear washed over him. "No matter what, Elmstar can't keep leading like this and if he won't change or step down..." Jaggedtail's voice broke off. *He needs to be overthrown.*

Maplepool knew this as well, everyone did. If Jaggedtail wanted to save his Clan, he would have to take the Clan from Elmstar, one way or another. The two of them sat in silence, both of them had lived their entire lives with Elmstar but now he felt like a complete stranger.

As Jaggedtail drifted off into thought, he noticed Barkclaw stepping out of the medicine cat den. The medicine cat looked utterly defeated, his amber eyes overflowing with grief. Jaggedtail had a bad feeling in his chest as he watched the medicine cat go to his brother. He couldn't hear them, but he watched Branchfur drop his head. "Stormsong is dead." Jaggedtail breathed out, Maplepool had been watching as well.

"Oh, Jaggedtail." Maplepool whimpered. "What is LichenClan going to do?"

"We'll survive." Jaggedtail mewed, holding back the fear in his throat. "LichenClan will always survive."

Chapter 43

Jaggedtail had barely slept in the past few days, his mind was plagued with thoughts of LichenClan's future. He had gone over so many different scenarios, but the only ones that he saw working were the ones were Elmstar was no longer leader. He didn't know what to do, he didn't know if he could bring himself to *kill* his best friend, even the thought made Jaggedtail sick.

Three sunrises had passed since Elmstar took a swipe at Jaggedtail and he hadn't said a word to his leader, he kept patrols going but morale in LichenClan was incredibly low, in the days that followed, Cedarcloud and Poppywing had lost their lives to sickness and the once full elder's den was only inhabited by Barksong, the old she-cat was incredibly upset by the death of all of her friends. There was no more sickness in the Clan, but only because it had died out with the cats who carried it.

The cats who fought in the battle were recovering, the worst had been Fieldfoot, Mousethorn and Cherrypool but all were recovering well. Jaggedtail was glad that his mate was doing well, but there was a dark cloud over LichenClan and if Jaggedtail didn't do something soon, then a violent storm would be unleashed upon the Clan. Snow still covered the forest floor and the cats were still cold with prey running lower and lower. *Leaf-bare is far from over, and the same can be said for LichenClan's strife.*

Jaggedtail needed advice, usually he would go to Maplepool, Cherrypool or Elmstar but he felt that none of them could give him the answers that he needed. Instead, Jaggedtail found himself walking to the medicine cat den. He stepped inside where Barkclaw was cleaning up his now empty den.

"Barkclaw, I need to talk to you." He spoke once inside.

"About what?" Barkclaw's voice was dry, the medicine cat sounded so defeated. Jaggedtail felt a pang of sympathy for the young medicine cat, he had lost so much in just a few short days. *A lot of*

us have.

"Elmstar."

Barkclaw tensed but sat down, facing Jaggedtail. "Go on then, talk."

"I know now that I made the wrong choice." Jaggedtail began, but he could tell that the medicine cat was confused. "Sorry--" He cleared his throat. "Before Sagefeather died she told me that I would have to make a choice, and that this choice would change LichenClan forever. I made a choice to follow Elmstar into that battle when I should've tried to stop it."

Barkclaw nodded slowly. "Sagefeather had mentioned something about a choice, but never explained it."

"I see now that Elmstar needs to be stopped, something happened to him and he is going to destroy this Clan if he isn't stopped. I needed to know if StarClan told you anything about Elmstar's dreams."

Barkclaw shook his head. "StarClan has been silent."

Jaggedtail flicked his ear. "Well I need to do something, and I know that Elmstar won't step down. I need to chase him out of the Clan, then maybe I could take the leadership from him."
Barkclaw sighed. "Unfortunately, it won't be that easy." He mewed.

"I know it won't be easy."

"That's not what I meant," Barkclaw rested his tail across his paws. "If you do manage to chase Elmstar out and go to the Moonstone to get your nine lives, you won't get them. You'll get one life, which isn't much different than now."

Jaggedtail flattened his ears. "What? Why not?"

"As long as Elmstar still has lives you won't be able to get all nine of yours, even if Elmstar was on his final life you would only be able to get eight. If you want all nine lives, Elmstar would need to lose all of his or have them removed by going to StarClan and stepping down as leader before then, which you said he wouldn't do."

Jaggedtail stared at his paws, the thought of fighting his friend was painful enough, but killing him?" Jaggedtail's heart ached within his chest. "So, my only choice is to kill him eight times..."

Barkclaw nodded slowly. "I'm sorry, Jaggedtail." He sighed. "That is the only option."

Jaggedtail stood up, he didn't know what to do with this new information. *Can I really kill him?* Jaggedtail wondered, his heart twisted. *Can I kill my best friend?* "Thanks, Barkclaw. I need to figure this out." He padded slowly out of the medicine cat den, his eyes searching for his only source of comfort, Cherrypool.

He found his mate stretching out in her injured leg, which was wrapped in a thick layer of herbs. Jaggedtail walked through the snow to reach her, she looked up at him and upon seeing his expression, concern filled her eyes. "What's wrong?"

"I just spoke to Barkclaw." Jaggedtail sat down, staring down at his paws. "Even if I were to chase Elmstar out, I wouldn't be able to get nine lives from StarClan because he still has his."

"I see..." Cherrypool sighed. "Oh, Jaggedtail." Cherrypool leaned against Jaggedtail, he moved close to her, taking in her warmth and sweet scent. "I'm so sorry, will you be able to do it?"

"Do I even have a choice?" Jaggedtail mewed. "If I don't do *something*, Elmstar will destroy this Clan and I can't let that happen, I need to protect my Clan, even if it means protecting it from my best friend." Cherrypool didn't say anything else, and neither did Jaggedtail. He was struggling with his reality, with the fact that he would have to kill his best friend.

"Cats of LichenClan!" Jaggedtail jumped at Elmstar's sudden call, his head snapped up and he looked towards the High Stump where Elmstar stood. *He didn't even use the proper summons.* Jaggedtail thought. "StarClan have shown me another vision!" Jaggedtail stood up. *No, not this again.*

The rest of LichenClan showed the same uneasy body language, none of them even gathered. *I have to stop this.* "StarClan have

shown me dreams of AshClan attacking our Clan, killing off our remaining warriors! We have to stop them before it is too late!"

"We're not fighting another battle!" Foxwhisker spoke up. "You're insane!"

At the warrior's words, Elmstar's eyes flared with with fury. "I am your leader! My word is the warrior code!"

"You're not my leader." Foxwhisker lashed his tail. "I refuse to follow you!" Jaggedtail noticed Elmstar's claws extending from his paws, and he had a dangerous glare set on Foxwhisker. *He's going to attack him!* Elmstar moved forward, but Jaggedtail sprinted across the camp as fast as he can. Before Elmstar could reach Foxwhisker, Jaggedtail slammed his body into his friend's and knocked him to the ground.

Elmstar scrambled to his paws and looked at Jaggedtail with hurt in his eyes. "Traitor!" Elmstar yowled and jumped towards Jaggedtail. Jaggedtail braced himself for the attack and lashed out with both forepaws, they met Elmstar's chest and blood sprayed the snow on the forest floor.

Jaggedtail raked his claws down Elmstar's flank and quickly twisted on his paws to face Elmstar who was moving in quickly. He swiped near Jaggedtail's face and Jaggedtail felt claws tear across his muzzle and nose, he smelled and tasted the blood that dripped from his wounds. *I'm fighting my best friend, my brother, my leader.* Jaggedtail thought painfully, but he wouldn't back down. *This is for LichenClan!*

Jaggedtail hissed and charged forward with his claws out. He and Elmstar collided and Jaggedtail lost himself in a fury of teeth and claws. He sank his teeth in Elmstar's shoulder, tasting his blood. Elmstar kicked Jaggedtail's hind legs and caused him to drop into the snow. Jaggedtail rolled away from Elmstar could deliver a painful blow.

Jaggedtail jumped back to his paws and made a leap onto Elmstar's back, causing him to lose his balance by sinking his claws into his shoulders and forcing him to the side. Jaggedtail jumped off before

Elmstar hit the ground. The leader landed on his side, sending up a flurry of snow as he landed.

Jaggedtail lashed out at Elmstar's now exposed belly, clawing down the soft fur. Elmstar hissed in rage and struggled back up to his paws, the wound on his belly was bleeding heavily. Elmstar's eyes were wide, filled with pain, loss, hatred and fury. He trembled and before Jaggedtail could attack again, Elmstar turned tail and ran into the forest, out of LichenClan camp. Jaggedtail stared after his friend and the trail of blood that he left. *I won.* Jaggedtail thought. *But it is far from over.*

Jaggedtail faced the rest of the Clan, they all watched with pure shock. "Jaggedtail--" Foxwhisker mewed, his voice shaking.

"What does this mean for us?" Twigheart spoke up. "Our leader ran away!"

"It means that Jaggedtail is now our leader." Hazelshine mewed. "Jaggedtail has defeated Elmstar, and driven him out of the Clan."

"That's not true." Jaggedtail finally found his words. "As long as Elmstar still has his lives, I won't be able to get mine."

"Then what are you going to do?" Owlheart questioned.

Jaggedtail looked over his Clanmates, they were scared, shocked and in desperate need of an answer, of a better future. His eyes travelled to Maplepool and Mossleaf who had seen the whole fight, their eyes were wide in horror and pain. *I'm so sorry.* Jaggedtail's heart had broken completely, and he didn't think he would be able to fix it. "I have to finish this." Jaggedtail mewed. "I have to find Elmstar, and put an end to his leadership."

"But every cat here knows how close you two are." Twigheart mewed. "Can you really do it?"

"I have to be the one to do it." Jaggedtail dropped his head. "It's not going to be easy, but I have to do it. I have to kill Elmstar."

Chapter 44

"I've done everything I can for you, Jaggedtail." Barkclaw mewed. "It's your turn now." Jaggedtail sighed, it was the day after Elmstar had been driven out and Jaggedtail had barely slept. His wounds had been treated and he had been given herbs for strength but nothing could give him the mental strength it would need to kill his friend, he just had to hope that when the time finally came, he would be able to do it.

Jaggedtail walked out of the medicine cat den, he saw that Mossleaf, Maplepool and Cherrypool were all waiting for him. Jaggedtail took a deep breath. "Mossleaf...Maplepool, I'm so sorry that I have to do this."

"Don't apologize, Jaggedtail." Maplepool's eyes were overflowed with sadness. "Elmstar isn't the cat I used to know, he's not my mate and he's not Mossleaf's father anymore. We both understand what has to be done, it just hurts."

"Jaggedtail I'm so sorry for the things that I said to you." Mossleaf whimpered. "I don't want to lose my father but...he almost ruined the Clan." Mossleaf was overcome with sadness and fell into Maplepool who began to comfort her.

Cherrypool stepped forward. "Jaggedtail," She breathed out. "I know how hard this is for you, but please...please come back to me." Cherrypool pressed her nose into Jaggedtail's, and her fears were justified. Elmstar had eight lives, Jaggedtail only had one. This would be a hard fight, and if Jaggedtail lost then LichenClan was doomed to fall. *I can't lose.* Jaggedtail told himself over and over.

"I need to go." Jaggedtail mewed. "I have to find Elmstar." He didn't want to move, he wanted to stay in camp and forget about everything that had happened but he couldn't. He had to do this, no matter what. Jaggedtail didn't announce his departure, he just set out into the forest, following the blood trail that Elmstar had left behind.

As Jaggedtail followed the trail, his mind wandered to the past. He thought about when they were all kits, before Robinkit had died. Everything was so easy, so simple. All they had to worry about was playing and having fun. Then Robinkit died and they became apprentices, Jaggedtail had been so excited to train. Even though he broke his tail, he had so much fun as an apprentice. *Elmstar didn't.* Jaggedtail thought, he had been an apprentice when he killed Blacksky, and changed so much for LichenClan.

They became warriors, and everything seemed so perfect. Jaggedtail, Elmstar and Maplepool all fought side by side to earn their warrior names and served their Clan happily. Rowanfang left and became a kittypet, Elmstar had been severely hurt by that and then he had lost his mother. Jaggedtail had been worried about him back then, but then he fell in love with Maplepool and they had Mossleaf. Jaggedtail painfully realized that that was the last time he had seen Elmstar genuinely happy. *What happened to him?*

Jaggedtail didn't believe that Elmstar was evil, he never wanted to do this to LichenClan but some kind of darkness had consumed him, something had turned him into the violent, bloodthirsty leader that he was now. *I won't remember him as Elmstar, but as Elmheart, a wonderful warrior, a dedicated father and mate and my best friend.*

As Jaggedtail followed the blood trail, he noticed it got bigger, not smaller. Then he came across a large stain of crimson in the snow. In the snow was the shape of a cat who had fallen. *Elmstar lost a life from the wound I gave him*. Jaggedtail thought painfully. He had clearly gotten back up and Jaggedtail could follow his scent and paw prints from here on, they were leading to the twolegplace. *If he ran off in there, I don't know if I will be able to find him.* Jaggedtail thought with worry.

With a sigh, Jaggedtail pressed on. He noticed that Elmstar's paw prints were shaky and unstable and he had stumbled several times. The prints didn't go directly to the twolegplace, but veered off as he grew closer. The edge of the twolegplace wasn't far, but it was so close to a thunderpath. *He's weak.* Jaggedtail thought. *But he still has seven lives to lose.*

Jaggedtail saw something through the trees, he was out of

LichenClan territory by now and noticed a strange stone ledge that dropped off into a small clearing that led to the thunderpath. The thunderpath wasn't busy, but Jaggedtail prayed he didn't have to cross it, and was certain that he wouldn't have to.

The air smelled strongly of Elmstar, also of fear. "Elmstar!" Jaggedtail called out, he knew that his friend was near. Jaggedtail heard shuffled movement and then saw the ear tips of Elmstar, he was beneath the stone ledge. Elmstar jumped up onto the ledge, nearly losing his balance.

Elmstar's pelt was rugged and his belly fur was matted with blood. "So you came after me." Elmstar lashed his tail. "Going to finish me off? And I thought we were friends." He spat the final word, Jaggedtail couldn't help but flinch.

"We are friends, Elmstar." Jaggedtail spoke. "And it doesn't have to be this way," *I'll give him one final chance.* "But you can't lead LichenClan anymore, you have to step down."

"You already chased me out." Elmstar growled. "Why don't you just get your own nine lives, oh wait--" Elmstar sneered. "I have them, don't I?" He let out a fury filled hiss. "Too bad, Jaggedtail, you'll have to rip these lives from my body!" Elmstar charged forward Jaggedtail. *Guess not.* Jaggedtail yowled and faced Elmstar.

Elmstar tackled Jaggedtail to the ground and began slashing violently at Jaggedtail's chest. "You were supposed to be by my side!" Elmstar cried.

"I was!" Jaggedtail gripped Elmstar's shoulders and shoved his hind legs into Elmstar's already injured belly. Elmstar yowled in pain and stumbled backwards. "Then you tried to destroy my Clan!" Jaggedtail jumped onto Elmstar's back, raking claws down his back. Elmstar flipped onto his back, crushing Jaggedtail underneath his weight.

"You don't know what I've seen!" Elmstar hissed, jumping up and pinning Jaggedtail to the ground, his claws ripping down Jaggedtail's flank. The pain was intense, his vision began to blur from the pain. "I did everything I could to save our Clan!"

This doesn't end here. Jaggedtail forced through the pain and craned his neck, sinking his teeth into Elmstar's hind leg. Elmstar ripped his leg away and hissed loudly, he loosened his grip just enough for Jaggedtail to break free. "Those weren't visions from StarClan!" Jaggedtail shouted. "Those were nightmares! You let them take control of your life and it ruined you!"
"Shut up!" Elmstar lashed out with more strength and fury than Jaggedtail expected and he was shoved to the ground, Jaggedtail's head cracked against the edge of the stone ledge. "You don't know anything! No one does!" Jaggedtail could see into Elmstar's eyes, he was truly disturbed. Nightmares and fears had turned what was once a noble warrior into a paranoid battle hungry ruler.

Elmstar raised his paw to deliver a killing blow. *No!* Jaggedtail placed his paws on Elmstar's side, sinking his claws into his brown pelt. Jaggedtail lifted his backside and pushed his hind paws into Elmstar's belly once again, Elmstar kicked up and both he and Jaggedtail went over the ledge.

They landed on the ground below in a tangle of limbs. Jaggedtail pulled away first, but Elmstar attacked faster. He slammed Jaggedtail up against the stone wall. "We could've ruled this forest together! You made the wrong choice!" If he didn't act soon, then Elmstar would bite into his throat and kill him, but somehow, Jaggedtail's world seemed to slow down. *It always comes down to my choice.* Jaggedtail thought. *I didn't make the wrong choice.* He realized. *It was always going to come down to this. The true choice I had to make was killing Elmstar. I've made my choice, and Sagefeather was right, it's going to change the Clan.*

Something bright caught Jaggedtail's eyes and he saw the piercing eyes of a monster. He had never seen one up close before, but in this moment, Jaggedtail knew what he had to do. *I'm sorry, my friend.*

With all of his strength, Jaggedtail broke through Elmstar's grip and shoved his paws into Elmstar's chest. Elmstar hadn't been expecting the sudden attack and Jaggedtail had all the power. It took all of his strength, both mental and physical, but Jaggedtail shoved Elmstar onto the thunderpath, into the direct path of the monster.

The sound of the impact made Jaggedtail sick to his stomach, the monster raced away without a second though and Jaggedtail was left with what he had done. Elmstar was in the thunderpath, his body unmoving and blood pooling underneath him. Jaggedtail couldn't leave him there, he limped over to the thunderpath and secured his teeth into Elmstar's scruff, dragging him off of the hard surface and back into the snow.

Elmstar was unmoving, already losing a life. Jaggedtail looked at his friend, his hind legs were twisted unnaturally behind him and blood poured from wounds on his head and chest. *Even seven lives can't save him from that.* Jaggedtail thought painfully, but he didn't leave. He sat down beside Elmstar and waited.

Elmstar's body twitched and he opened his eyes slowly, they were dull and filled with pain. "I'm so sorry." Jaggedtail breathed out, he really couldn't comprehend what he had just done.

"D-don't be sorry..." Elmstar's voice trembled and for a moment, he sounded like the old Elmstar. Jaggedtail looked down at his friend. "I deserved this." Jaggedtail's eyes widened. *This really can't be where he realizes what he's done is wrong? Why couldn't he realize this sooner!*

"Elmstar--I--I tried to convince you." Jaggedtail's voice cracked. "I tried to help!" He wailed.

"I know, Jaggedtail--" Elmstar's voice faded and his eyes closed once more as he lost another life. Jaggedtail waited in painful silence for Elmstar to come back again. "I wouldn't have realized it if you didn't do this..." Elmstar's voice was weak and so quiet. "For the first time in moons...I can finally see." Elmstar turned his head weakly to look at Jaggedtail. "I've been dealing with these...nightmares for so long. I tried to ignore them when I was younger, but I let them consume me.

"I always knew something was wrong with me, something dark was inside my head I could never get it out...but you did." Blood trickled slowly out of Elmstar's mouth but his eyes were no longer filled with pain, but with love.

"Elmstar..." Jaggedtail breathed out his friend's name, curling up

beside his broken body. Elmstar slipped away once again and Jaggedtail buried his nose into his pelt. "I didn't want it to be this way."

"Neither did I." Elmstar mewed,. "But I made so many, countless mistakes. I caused the death of Redpaw and so many others. LichenClan deserves a better leader, they deserve you, Jaggedtail."

Jaggedtail lifted his head, his entire body shaking. *I can't handle this.* "I've lived my whole life with you by side, how can I go on without you?"

"You'll be fine..." Elmstar nudged Jaggedtail's chin. "You all will. Just...do me a favor when you become leader."

"Anything." Jaggedtail mewed, he felt like a helpless kit. He wanted to turn back time, he wanted to do all it again, He wanted to help Elmstar before his nightmares took over.

"Please, tell the Clan how sorry am I...tell Maplepool that I love her more than anything and Mossleaf too..." His voice choked. "Please...bring that kittypet into the Clan." Jaggedtail stared in shock. "Let her be happy without me..." Once again, Elmstar faded away into losing a life. *He has four left* Jaggedtail thought painfully.

Once Elmstar was back Jaggedtail pulled him closer. "I'll do all of that, Elmstar." He whimpered. "I'm going to make sure that you're remembered for all the things you did for LichenClan, we'll all know you as the cat we loved and respected."

"Thank you..." Elmstar went quiet once again, he was losing his lives faster and faster. Jaggedtail's time with Elmstar was limited, he had to tell him everything racing through his head. Once Elmstar's breath returned, Jaggedtail began.

"Elmstar, I'm so sorry I had to do this. I don't want to lose my best friend, my brother. You helped me become who I am today, I wish I could go back and change everything. I don't want to lose you!" Jaggedtail couldn't contain his emotions any longer. "I want my brother!"

"I don't want to leave either..." Elmstar choked out. "But you have to live on...without me...for me. For LichenClan. Return to our family, to our Clan and show them a leader that they deserve." Elmstar's breathing stopped again. *Two left.*

Elmstar opened his eyes. "When you see Crowsky," Jaggedtail thought to the MoonClan warrior, out of nowhere the apprentice had returned. Cloudstar's explanation had been that he had been on a mission for the Clan. "Tell him I'm sorry about Blacksky...and apologize to all the Clans for me, please."

"I will." Jaggedtail promised and Elmstar lost his eighth life. *This is his final life, the last time I'll ever be able to speak to him alive.* Jaggedtail didn't waste any time once Elmstar showed signs of life, even if they were weak. "Elmstar, I love you my brother. I'm going to miss you so much, I'm so, so sorry."

"I love you to brother..." Elmstar mewed, his eyes already closing again. "One more thing..." Jaggedtail nodded slowly. "Don't let them forget about me..." Elmstar spoke his final words and his ninth and final life slipped away.

Jaggedtail tilted his head back and let out a mournful wail, his brother was dead. They had done everything together, and now he was gone. Jaggedtail opened his eyes and looked up towards the cloudy sky. "Please, StarClan." He began. "Please, welcome him into your ranks. Let me see him again some day! Mosswing, Fawnsky, Redpaw, Robinkit, take care of him!" Jaggedtail cried.

He collapsed beside his best friend, feeling empty and endless pain at the same time, how could Elmstar be dead? How could he go on without him? Jaggedtail laid by his Elmstar's body for a long time, he knew he had to return to LichenClan eventually, but for now he just wanted to feel the last of Elmstar's warmth, the last of his scent. The final things that Elmstar who he was.

Countless memories flowed through Jaggedtail's head of his friend, he would hold onto these memories forever. *I'll never forget you, Elmstar. I promise.* At long last, as small snowflakes began to fall onto their pelts, Jaggedtail knew he needed to leave.

He buried Elmstar himself, not too far from the camp and he began the long walk back to his camp. By the time he reached the camp, it was sunset and he could see his Clanmates were anxious about his return. Maplepool, Mossleaf, Cherrypool and Brackenheart were all sitting outside the leader's den, looking panicked and pained. *Our family.* Jaggedtail stepped into the camp, getting the attention of Brackenheart first.

"You're back!" He called and sprinted across camp with the rest on his tail.

"Oh, Jaggedtail." Cherrypool swarmed Jaggedtail, rubbing all over him. Her sweet scent calmed him, but it didn't take away from the pain.

"Is Elmstar--" Maplepool's voice cracked. Jaggedtail nodded slowly and Maplepool's legs gave out. "I know you had to I just--" He voice broke off and she buried her nose into Mossleaf who did the same to her mother. Jaggedtail stumbled towards his sister and he fell against her, the pain taking over once again.

"He wanted me to tell you how much he loved you, as he died he was finally free from the darkness. He loved us all so much." Maplepool wailed in pain at Jaggedtail's words and they shared a very long, very painful moment as a family.

The Clan had seen Jaggedtail's return and looked to him expecting answers. Jaggedtail lifted his head. "I have to talk to them." He mewed and stood up, despite the pain that filled his entire body. He jumped onto the High Stump for the first time, but also the last time as Jaggedtail. "Cats of LichenClan! Elmstar is dead, but I ask of you one thing." Jaggedtail couldn't keep his voice from trembling. "Don't remember Elmstar as the violent leader, please remember him as wonderful, dedicated warrior we knew him as before. I buried his body, but today I lost my best friend, we lost a father, a mate and a brother."

The cats of LichenClan held a final, long moment of silence for Elmstar. Jaggedtail knew that this pain would never go away, but as of now, LichenClan was without a leader. "Tonight I will travel to the Moonstone, and I will return as your leader. I hope that I can be

the leader that you all deserve."

"You'll be perfect." Cherrypool spoke up from the crowd.

"Jaggedtail! Jaggedtail!" The Clan cheered his name, but he didn't feel like he deserved it. *Sagefeather was right, my choice changed the Clan. I've seen three leaders in my lifetime and now, it's my turn.*

Chapter 45

Jaggedtail walked beside Barkclaw through the snowy forest, the moon was starting to rise and it would be his final night as Jaggedtail. The walk was silent, he had left his Clan behind to get his nine lives and Jaggedtail wasn't sure if he was ready, but he knew it's what he had to do.

Jaggedtail had only been to the moonstone once, and it was many moons ago when he was an apprentice. Now he was going to be a leader, and nothing would be the same again. They crossed the river and Jaggedtail found himself back in the Spirit Woods. Their white bark seemed to glow under the moonlight, he could've sworn he heard whispers in the trees. Jaggedtail followed Barkclaw to the Spirit Tree which stood tall in the ghostly forest.

"When you go in there, you'll touch your nose to the Moonstone and you will fall asleep. Then StarClan will give your nine lives, you are not allowed to tell anyone what you see tonight. Don't be scared." Barkclaw explained when Jaggedtail tensed.

Jaggedtail nodded slowly and together the two of them ventured deep into the cavern. Jaggedtail felt anxiety creep in his chest, he had never seen such pure darkness. He had no idea that such a winding tunnel was beneath the Spirit Tree. The walk seemed to take forever, but in an instant the tunnel was flooded with light and Jaggedtail stepped into a large cavern. In the center was a huge stone, it shimmered with starlight and turned both his and Barkclaw's pelts silver. *The moonstone.* Jaggedtail couldn't speak, the stone was so brilliant that it had completely taken his breath away.

"Go ahead, Jaggedtail." Barkclaw nudged, his voice echoing in the cavern.

Jaggedtail forced his paws to move forward, he laid down in front of the stone. He could almost see stars sparkling within the stone. He tucked his paws under his chest and leaned in, touching his nose to the stone's surface. In an instant, Jaggedtail slipped into the

darkness.

He couldn't move, his body was cold and no part of his body would move. *What's happening to me?* Jaggedtail wondered. After a few moments, warmth filled his body and Jaggedtail could finally open his eyes. He sat up, but he was no longer in the Spirit Tree, he was in the gathering hollow. "Hello?" He called out, wondering why he was completely alone.

Movement caught his eye and he saw that the stars were moving. *What in the world?* Jaggedtail wondered. The stars came down from the dark sky and swirled before him, forming into the shapes of cats. Nine cats appeared before him, and his heart ached as he realized they were all faces he had seen before.

He saw Fawnsky, Mosswing, Sunstorm and so many more. At the sights of Redpaw his heart ached, he looked just as he remembered him! *My beautiful son.* Then Jaggedtail's eyes travelled to a cat he had just seen, Elmstar was sitting beside Mosswing. He was tall and bold, stars shimmering in his pelt. *He made it to StarClan.*

"Welcome, Jaggedtail." It seemed as if all the voices of StarClan were speaking to him, it sent a chill down his spine. "Your leadership ceremony will now begin."

Jaggedtail waited patiently as the first cat stepped forward, it was Robinkit. Jaggedtail hadn't seen Robinkit in so many moons, but here she was, full of stars and light. Robinkit stopped before Jaggedtail and looked up at him. "With this life I give you curiosity, never forget the curiosity of a kit and let it help you learn so many new things."

Robinkit lifted her nose, and Jaggedtail realized he had to touch his nose to hers. As their noses touched, a strange feeling swarmed his body. It was the eagerness to learn, to find and explore. "Not all lives will feel the same." Robinkit purred before running back to Mosswing's side.

The next cat to step forward was Mosswing, she left her little kit with Fawnsky to face Jaggedtail. "I'm so glad to see you here, I am proud of you, as if you were my own kit. With this life I give you a

mother's love, you know what it's like to love a kit as a father, but with this life you will love your Clan with the same love as a mother." Mosswing touched her nose to Jaggedtail and he was not expecting the pain that ripped through his entire body. The pain of love, loss and care.

Mosswing stepped back, leaving Jaggedtail with trembling legs. She gave a respectful nod before going back to the lineup and Fawnsky took his place. "Oh, my sweet son." Fawnsky purred. "I am so proud of both you and Maplepool. With this life I give you hope, always hold onto this to help you and your Clan get through even the darkest of times." Fawnsky and Jaggedtail touched noses and he felt the pain of fear, the desire to give up but it soon faded away with the light of hope and love.

"Thank you." Jaggedtail breathed out as Fawnsky returned to the lineup. Next up was Sunstorm, Jaggedtail's father. He was back to his full strength and youth.

"I'm proud of you as well, my son. I know you'll lead LichenClan well. "With this life I give you strength. Use this strength in the heat of battle, but to also overcome the struggles in your Clan." Sunstorm touched his nose to Jaggedtail's and he felt the raging fire of battle burn within in his body.

Next was Redpaw, Jaggedtail's heart twisted at the sight of his son. "Oh, my beautiful son." Jaggedtail breathed out. "I miss you so much."

"I miss you too," Redpaw mewed. "But I'm doing alright uphere, you need to worry about leading your Clan. With this life I give you playfulness, never forget the joy that you had as an apprentice." As they touched noticed, Jaggedtail felt that Redpaw's life wasn't as painful as the others. It made him happy and joyful. Redpaw trotted back and it was Hareclaw who took his place.

"My apprentice." Hareclaw gave Jaggedtail a respectful nod. "I knew you were always destined for greatness, but with this life I have you humility. Lead with pride but not arrogance, never forget who you are, where you came from and everything that your Clan has done for you." Hareclaw's life gave him fear, made him worry about

becoming a good leader, but then it flooded with warmth.

Next up was Birdstar, the old leader that Jaggedtail had admired for so long. "I am very happy to see that LichenClan is now in your paws, Jaggedtail. I know you will lead a very long life, and guide LichenClan into the future. With this life I give you patience, you may get anxious waiting for things to happen, but if you just wait, good things will come to you and your Clan."

Jaggedtail and Birdstar touched noses, and Jaggedtail felt the anxiety of waiting but it was soon replaced with the smoothe satisfaction of getting what he wanted. Birdstar gave him a respectful nod and the next cat was Sagefeather.

"What I predicted came true." Sagefeather mewed. "Though I knew you would make the right choice, but with this life I give you intelligence for the next time you have to make a hard choice, you will have the ability to do it." Jaggedtail felt the pain of the choices he's had to make the past few moons, and with her life he felt that he would be able to handle it.

Sagefeather returned and his final life stepped forward, it was Elmstar. *My friend, my brother.* Elmstar moved up to Jaggedtail. "Thank you, Jaggedtail." Elmstar dipped his head. "Because of you I am finally free and LichenClan will be safe with you as their leader." Jaggedtail felt the pain of losing Elmstar once again, but as he earned his life, he knew that Elmstar would be with him forever. "With this life I give you loyalty," He mewed boldly. "Never forget where your heart belongs, to your family, to your Clan and to yourself." Jaggedtail and Elmstar touched noses one last time and the life shot through his entire body.

Elmstar stepped back and looked over Jaggedtail, with nine lives racing through his body Jaggedtail felt different, he *was* different. "I hail you by your new name, Jaggedstar." Elmstar began speaking again. "Your old life is no more. You have now received the nine lives of a leader, and StarClan grants you the guardianship of LichenClan. Defend it well; care for young and old; honor your ancestors and the traditions of the warrior code; live each life with pride and dignity."

"Jaggedstar! Jaggedstar! Jaggedstar!" The cats of StarClan cheered his brand new name. *No longer Jaggedtail, but Jaggedstar.* Jaggedstar thought. Elmstar stepped forward to face Jaggedtail once again.

"You are now a Clan leader, Jaggedstar." Elmstar mewed. "I am glad you took my place, I can finally rest in peace. Don't feel bad for killing me, it's what had to be done and now LichenClan is in good paws. Be better than mine, Jaggedstar and someday we will meet again."

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Jaggedstar stepped into LichenClan camp for the first time as leader, it felt different and all the same. It was just past dawn now, and Cherrypool, Maplepool were waiting anxiously for Jaggedstar's return. They saw him and ran to his side. "You're back." Cherrypool purred, nuzzled all over Jaggedstar.

"So you're Jaggedstar now?" Maplepool mewed curiously.

"I am." Jaggedstar confirmed.

Maplepool breathed a sigh of relief. "Welcome, Jaggedstar. I'm so proud of you."

Jaggedstar was grateful for his mother's words, he was so glad to have her support, as long as he had Maplepool, Cherrypool and Brackenheart he would be able to do it. "Who are you going to chose as deputy?" Cherrypool questioned.

"I have an idea, I just have to wait." Jaggedstar mewed, he had thought about the cat on his way back and it was a cat who had provided support to both him and the ones he loved. He waited for the Clan to wake up before he held his first meeting as a leader.

Jaggedstar jumped onto the High Stump and looked over his camp. "Let all cats old enough to catch their own prey gather around the High Stump for a Clan meeting!" He called out the ancient words that felt so natural on his tongue. The cats of LichenClan began to gather, looking up at their new leader expectantly.

"I've received my nine lives." Jaggedstar began. "I have a lot to

make up for in the wake of our past few moons, but if you put your faith in me I promise to lead us into a bright future."

"Jaggedstar! Jaggedstar!" They cheered their brand new leader, and Jaggedstar felt so proud that he was leading this Clan.

"Now I must name my new deputy." Jaggedstar mewed. "I say these words before the spirits of StarClan so they may hear and approve my choice, Hazelshine will be the new deputy of LichenClan!" Hazelshine's eyes went wide and she stepped forward. "Are you sure, Jaggedstar?"

"Absolutely," Jaggedstar nodded. "You've provided support to so many cats in this Clan, and it doesn't matter what mistakes any of us have made in the past, this is our future. I want you as my deputy."

"Then I will happily rule by your side, Jaggedstar. Thank you for this opportunity, I won't let LichenClan down."

"Hazelshine! Hazelshine!" Jaggedstar was proud of his choice, he knew that she would do things right for the Clan, she was kind and compassionate which is what LichenClan thought. *I've named my deputy, but I still have a promise to keep.*

Jaggedstar jumped down and found Mossleaf. "Will you go on a walk with me?" He questioned.

"Of course." Mossleaf nodded and Jaggedstar led her out of the camp. "How's being leader?"
"Strange." Jaggedstar replied. "I didn't think this day would ever happen, but here we are." He thought with a purr. "But there's something I want to do."

"What's that?" Jaggedstar led Mossleaf far out into the territory, but she didn't really notice how far out they were going until they saw the twolegplace. "Wait--" She stopped in her tracks. "Jaggedstar why are we out here?"
"Because," Jaggedstar turned to Mossleaf. "I'm going to invite Spade to join our Clan."

Mossleaf's eyes went wide. "What? You are?" She jumped in front of him. "I need to tell you that I kept seeing him, even though Elmstar told me to stop."

"I assumed." Jaggedstar purred. "Go find him for me please." Mossleaf's eyes filled with love and she sprinted towards the twolegplace, a few moments later she returned with the black and white kittypet.

"You wanted to see me?" Spade questioned, facing the leader bravely.

"I did," Jaggedstar mewed. "You said you wanted to join our Clan, yes?" Spade nodded. "You understand the struggles you will face? This leaf-bare in particular has been rough and full of strife. We faced sickness, battles and death. Is this something you're willing to deal with?"

"I would do anything to be by Mossleaf's side."

"You won't just be with Mossleaf, you'll be serving me and the rest of your Clanmates."

"I understand."

Jaggedstar purred, Spade didn't seemed fazed by this at all. "Then come with me, and I will bring you into my Clan."

"Really?" Spade seemed completely shocked. "Thank you so much." He dipped his head.

"Don't thank me," Jaggedstar turned to Mossleaf. "This was one of your father's dying wishes, he told me to bring Spade into the Clan to make you happy."

Mossleaf's eyes filled with emotion, she looked up towards the sky. "Thank you, father." She whispered gently and Jaggedstar turned to Spade.

"Come on," He mewed, turning back towards LichenClan camp. "Let's go home."

Epilogue

Jaggedstar looked up at the cloudy air, he felt the cold biting at his old bones and his cough rattled in his chest. He climbed down from his den, his joints aching as he moved. His head felt cloudy, his eyes were failing him as were his ears. *Could this be the end?* Jaggedstar questioned.

He had led for many, many moons and he was proud of the life that he had lived. Spade had been welcomed into the Clan as Seedclaw and soon he and Mossleaf had kits of their own. Even Jaggedstar's own son had kits of his own. *I've lived a wonderful life.* Jaggedstar thought, a lot had changed. Many lives had been lost and created, he had faced struggles and hardships but LichenClan still stood strong.

He faced Thornstar as Dawnstar defeated him, and helped his Clan recover but the state of the forest was one that LichenClan would survive, but Jaggedstar would not. The forest was dying, and he stayed behind to let his Clan start their new lives with Timbertail as their leader. Timbertail was the son of Branchfur, who betrayed Jaggedstar to stand beside Thornstar which cost him his life.

Jaggedstar thought about all the cats that he had lost, the most painful had been Cherrypool. He had lived a very long life with his beautiful mate, but she had lost her life to greencough moons ago. Jaggedstar missed her every single day, just as he missed Elmstar and Redpaw, but soon he would be back with the loves of his life.

Hazelshine had served as a very loyal deputy until she died to sickness, then he named his niece Mossleaf as deputy. She served for a long time before she ate sickened prey from the dying forest and passed, then he named Timbertail. He had so much faith in Timbertail to lead LichenClan well once they found their new home.

Jaggedstar found himself drifting off in the middle of the camp, he was old and he was sick. *My time is near.* Jaggedstar thought and wondered if this was how Sagefeather felt in her final days. He

knew death as here, and in all honesty; he wasn't scared. He was excited to see his loved ones again, and it would be soon.

Jaggedstar didn't want to die in camp, however. He stood up and began walking through the dead, snow-filled forest. Prey was slow, but since it was just him he didn't have too much to worry about. Jaggedstar found that each step was harder and harder, but he had to make it to where he was going.

Jaggedstar dragged his paws through the snow, but he finally found the place where he wanted to close his eyes for the last time. It was the place that he had buried Elmstar so long ago. Jaggedstar curled up near his best friend's grave, baring through the biting cold and wind. *It won't be long now.*

Breathing was getting harder and harder, but he was ready to give up completely. He closed his eyes, as if he were going to sleep but he wouldn't be waking up. Jaggedstar felt at peace, he pictured his loved ones in his mind that he couldn't wait to see. *I'm coming.* Jaggedstar thought.

His body grew cold and Jaggedstar felt himself slowly fading away, the sound of the blowing wind faded away into a dull rumble until it was completely gone and Jaggedstar slipped into pure darkness.

He was surprised to open his eyes and found himself still in the same location, but he didn't *feel* the same. His bones no longer ached and he no longer felt sick. Jaggedstar stood up but looked down at his paws to see his own body lying at his paws. *I'm dead.* Jaggedstar realized. *It's strange, seeing my own body.*

Jaggedstar looked around, he wasn't cold but he didn't know where to go from here. It was then that a familiar scent filled his nose. Stars sparkled before him and Elmstar and Cherrypool stepped into his view. "It's finally time, old friend." Elmstar spoke. Jaggedstar was overwhelmed with love at the sight of the two of them. He quickly ran over to them and nuzzled up to Cherrypool, he hadn't scented her sweet fragrance in so long.

"I've missed you both so much." Jaggedstar whispered.

"I missed you too, my love." Cherrypool purred, taking a step back. "I've been waiting for you."

"Let's get moving," Elmstar playfully shoved Jaggedstar. "Come on slow slug,"
"I *just* got here." Jaggedstar chuckled, feeling like he did when he was a young warrior.

"Well, the Clans are almost home." Elmstar purred. "And I'm sure that you want to be there to give Timbertail one of his nine lives."

"I would love that." Jaggedstar mewed.

"Then follow us." Cherrypool purred. With his brother on one side and his beloved on the other, Jaggedstar followed the two of them into the forest. He left the old forest behind, leaving his entire life behind him as he walked into the stars.